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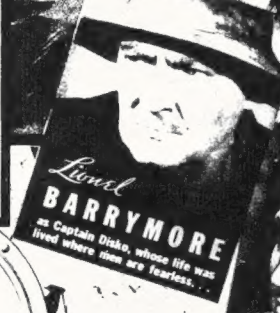

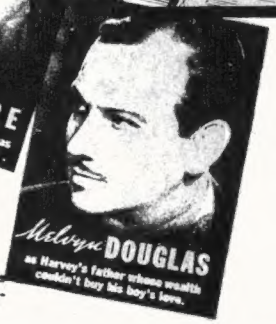

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MIKE SHAYNE
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

THY WILL BE DONE
by Brett Halliday

"Get the ones that did this, Mike," Will Gentry pleaded from the hospital bed. The redheaded private eye promised. He had a personal reason now to get the job done, and he'd do it—or die trying! *4*

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The still-lingering smoke burned Shayne's eyes. He took a deep breath and immediately recognized the odor. This was no accident, no boiler bursting, no natural gas explosion. C-4. The wrecked office had the familiar stench of the explosive. Bodies and debris were everywhere. And somewhere in this rubble was his friend Will Gentry!

Thy Will Be Done

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE BRIGHT SIGN PROCLAIMING *CIRCUITS MAXIMUS* loomed as tall and wide as the city of Miami Beach's ordinances would allow, and the December mid-afternoon sun gleaming off its metallic surface created the illusion it was the world's largest diamond. The figure below dressed all in black put one hand up to interrupt the glare and checked the notecard again. The address between the thumb and forefinger was the same.

This was the place. And if everything went right, the mission would soon be over.

The salesman whose nametag identified him simply as TONY noticed the hunched-over figure enter and glance around. The afternoon traffic had been slow, and since most paychecks wouldn't be cashed until the end of the working day and not spent until the weekend, Tony knew he had to hustle to make his quota.

The salesman stubbed out his cigar, tucked in his Hawaiian shirt, and sauntered up to the dark-clad figure with the huge sunglasses. "You're in the market for a high quality, low-price stereo system, *n'est pas?*"

"What?" responded the figure.

"Let me show you this little item. Latest thing from the land of the rising sun and slanted eyes." He pointed to a miniature hi fi about the size of an old family Bible.

"It is nice."

"Nice, the man says. Let me tell you about 'nice', bub. We're talking 20 watts per channel, a synthesized electronic quartz tuner, 5-band equalizer. You want me to go on? Of course you do. It's got Dolby with 4¾ inch woofers and 1½ inch tweeters. Now isn't that music to your

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ears? That's a pun, kid." He slapped the customer on the back.

"It sounds like a bargain, but . . . "

"No buts. I can let you have it for a song. How does 399 sound?"

"I assume the decimal point's at the end."

Try as he might, the salesman could not see through the thick, dark glasses. "Huh? Oh, yeah. Listen . . . "

The figure held up the notecard. "I'm supposed to ask for somebody named Max."

Tony Kimbrough paused. It was the third time that week. He had been working for Avery for almost three months now—actually 101 days since Myrna had kicked him out and told him not to come back till he had at least $1,000 in his pocket—and that name kept popping up. The problem was that as far as he knew no one named Max worked for Circuits Maximus.

"Max," the salesman repeated.

"Max," read the customer.

"Just a minute. Wait here." He walked past a couple of pimply-faced kids—the kind they called "nerds" back at Coral Gables High—who had been destroying the world all afternoon on an Apple IIc and knocked on the office door. A full minute later Theodore Avery, very tall, very bald, and very bulimic, appeared in the doorway. "What is it, Kimbrough?"

"Sir, someone else is waiting to see Max. The last time this happened I came to you and you . . . "

"I'll take care of it. In the meantime, see if you can get those kids out of here. They scare away the senior citizen trade."

"Yes, sir," answered the salesman, momentarily overcome by his boss's presence as well as body odor.

Kimbrough escorted the dark-clad figure over to Avery's door and watched it close in his face. All his instincts told him something was going on behind the door that meant more than the senior citizen trade, but what?

MIKE SHAYNE STEPPED OFF THE ELEVATOR ON THE THIRD floor of the Miami Police Department and started down the corridor. It had been less than two weeks since the private detective's last visit, but nearly everyone official who passed, from the file clerks down to officers, looked new. He smiled, remembering that when he had first come to Miami he had known almost everyone on the force from Chief Will Gentry right down to the beat cops. Now it seemed it would have been easier to memorize the rosters of the entire NFL.

He entered the outer office marked CHIEF. The waiting room,

crowded with uniforms and some civilians, suggested it wasn't the right time just to drop in on his old friend. Well, decided the redhead, his mission would just take a few minutes.

As he put his hand on the doorknob into the Gentry's office, a sharp voice commanded, "Stop right there, buddy."

He turned to see a stork-like secretary standing at her desk and pointing at him with a pen. The look on her face made him feel like a burglar caught in the act.

"If you want to see Chief Gentry, you'll have to sign in and take a number."

"Lady," said the redhead, "I thought this was a police station, not a bakery."

Her face was as stiff and pasty as new frosting on a birthday cake. "My name is Ms. Graff, and you'll have to follow standard operating procedure."

Shayne suppressed an urge to test the frosting with a stiff index finger. "Ms. Graff, would you mind telling Will that his old friend Mike Shayne is here."

"Yes, I would mind," she responded, escalating her coolness into frigidity. "Take a number. The Department has recently instituted a series of new policies that demand . . . "

"Mike Shayne," boomed the voice of Will Gentry through an opening door.

The detective watched as his friend ushered out a man in a light blue suit and a suede briefcase.

"Thanks for coming, Jenkins. Tell City Manager Cameron I'll take his recommendation under serious advisement." The police chief turned toward Shayne. "I thought I heard you jawing out here. Did you bring over those important papers I asked you for?"

Not having the slightest idea what was going on, the rawboned redhead played along. "Right here in my sports coat pocket. They need your signature."

"Then bring them in immediately. Hold my calls, Graff."

"But Chief Gentry," protested his secretary in what Shayne was sure was the loudest voice she could muster.

"Priorities, Graff. Priorities" was all the Chief said. As soon as the private investigator was inside, Gentry slammed the door.

"What's going on?" said Shayne, pausing to light up a Camel.

"The answer to my prayers."

"And what are all those people doing out there? Has the mountain come to Muhammid?"

Gentry sat back in his chair and fondled his favorite cigar as if it were

a new-born child. "You are looking at Week II of a new experiment called The Open Hour."

"What's it for?"

"Driving me crazy." Gentry lit up. "I think this thing tastes better because it's banned. You know, if they suddenly banned cigars from Toledo, I think I'd drive to Ohio."

"Perversity plain and simple. Explain to me about The Open Hour."

"In the last negotiations with the police union, one of their non-negotiable items was that I reserve one hour per week to listen to my men's problems."

"Sound reasonable to me," said Shayne, staring out the window at the tightly-packed traffic streaming by on I-95.

"On the surface, yes, but I spent most of my time dealing with those kind of problems anyway. This one hour just holds me up. It's the latest in a series of P.R.-political maneuvers."

"Bureaucracy, Will?"

"With a capital B, and that also stands for Bitch. When I started in this town years ago, I could barely keep up with the workload. Now between open hours, filling out Affirmative Action-Equal Opportunity Employment forms, applying for federal funds, and trying to find places for all the City Manager's and the Mayor's friends, the last thing I get to is the coke dealers and pickpockets."

"I thought they gave you an assistant to help you out."

"One of the City Manager's cronies. Believe me, Art Poole wants my job more than his."

Shayne turned around and looked in his friend's eyes. They seemed tired and the fire was dying if not out. "You ever think of changing jobs?"

"At my age?"

"Didn't your predecessor end up as security chief at some nuclear power plant?"

"Yeah, and his predecessor checked in unannounced at the county morgue, courtesy of a disgruntled employee's Colt .38." Gentry sucked air on a cigar that had gone out.

Shayne peered across the street where the new post office had been built. He took a deep whiff and smelled the paint. "They redecorate in here?"

"Changed everything but the man who sits in the chair behind this desk."

"Why?"

"Part P.R., part security, part the heliport on the roof." Will Gentry rose and walked over to the same east-facing window. Together they

stared at the concrete jungle that had grown up around them. "Every now and then, Mike, I start thinking about how much fun you and I have had on our rural fishing trips, and I'm tempted to apply for the Chief of Police job in Podunk, Missouri."

"What stops you?"

"It's probably no better. Besides, you've been beat up, jailed, shot, and tried. Why are you still a P.I.?"

"Because it's what I like, it's what I do best."

"Exactly."

The intercom's buzz interrupted them. Reluctantly Will Gentry picked it up. "Yeah, Graff? O.K." He hung up. "Duty calls. The head of the Citizens Review Board is here to discuss with me a Hispanic rookie who over-reacted in Overtown last week. Did you want something?"

The investigator reacted with mock-shock. "Will, I'm surprised at you. Why is it every time I drop in you think I want something?"

"Because you usually do."

Shayne held up two tickets. "For the Dolphins-Steelers playoff game Sunday."

"Ah, respite from the city wars."

"Yeah, complete with blitzes and bombs."

"My kind of violence," rubbing the marksmanship trophy on the corner of his desk. "You got your man. I'll call you tomorrow about who picks up whom."

Shayne started out the door.

"Mike, thanks."

"For these. I got 'em free."

"For listening."

Shayne smiled as he swept out the office and past a man who resembled the one who had been in Will's office about the time he had arrived. The redhead took the elevator down and headed south into the Visitors parking lot.

He had just crossed the street when he heard an explosion behind him.

He turned to see the glass shattering outward.

From the third floor.

From Will Gentry's office.

II

BEFORE THE FIRST SHARDS HAD STRUCK THE HOT PAVEment, Shayne was sprinting back toward the front door. The first floor resembled a beehive just invaded by a hungry bear's paw. Uniforms

ricocheted down the hallway like pool balls after the break.

Working his way through the human traffic, the screams and jostling, the redhead threw open the stairwell door. He took two and three steps at a time as he hurtled up to the third floor. At the top he felt the fire door—it wasn't hot. He opened it cautiously.

Waves of smoke rolled down the narrow corridor. Bodies littered the linoleum, their limbs at odd angles. A few figures staggered down the hallway. Low moans and coughing undercut the few, intermittent, high-pitched screams.

It was one of those scenes Shayne had seen many nights on the 6:00 news. But this wasn't Londonderry or Lebanon. This was his Miami.

He peered through the wreckage and carnage toward Will's office. The frosted-glass door had been replaced by a gaping maw of twisted steel and crumbled cinderblock. He picked his way through the mess carefully.

Through clenched teeth, he suddenly yelled out, "Will!"

His only answer was a spasmodic cough and a pained cry. Down the hall he heard a rescue team burst through the firedoor. Their response had taken less than a minute—his had been faster.

Outside sirens approached.

"Will," he screamed, stepping through the opening. The still-lingering smoke burned his eyes. He took a deep breath.

Immediately he recognized the odor. This was no accident, no boiler bursting, no natural gas explosion. C-4. The time Will had taken him out to the training grounds to watch the Special Threat Response team drifted through his mind. Yeah, this place had the familiar stench of the explosive that had become the "in" plaything for terrorists and hitmen.

He removed his coat and began fanning his way through the thick smoke. Under a desk he caught a glimpse of a hand barely protruding. His heart raced and he swallowed hard.

Quickly he lifted the desk.

What lay beneath was all that remained of Ms. Graff, and that didn't even include her index finger.

He fought for control of his stomach as two policemen arrived with a stretcher. Standing up, he looked at where a wall had once stood between the waiting room and Will's office. The drywall and two-by-fours had shattered inward. Whoever had planted the bomb had left it out here.

Afraid of what he would find, the detective pushed forward. His feet tripped over something. Shayne looked down. The man from the Civilian Review Board had learned first-hand what it was like in the

trenches.

Shayne's eyes scanned the room. A piece of gnarled metal in the corner was all that was left of Will's favorite trophy. All the outer walls and roof remained intact. The building had been prepared for a bomb—from everywhere but within. Through the blown-out windows he could see gathering on N.W. Second the same hungry on-lookers he found at every accident.

Where was Will? The Chief had said he had had a meeting within these very walls. Maybe for some miraculous reason Will had been called out of the office just before the blast. An unexpected visitor, a councilman perhaps. Wouldn't it be ironic if the cop had been saved by the very bureaucracy he despised?

A deep moan came from Shayne's left. The detective looked again. The sound issued from Will's private restroom. "It's why I took this job, Mike," the top cop had once joked. "After years of sharing a common pisserie, I finally get a little privacy." The door was slightly ajar. The detective forced it open.

Lying against a wall was the body of Will Gentry, its eyes closed.

Shayne bent over, anger and pain combining inside him.

An eyelid fluttered and a hand groped for the john.

"A heady move," whispered the cop.

"What?" said the surprised redhead.

"My being in here," coughed Gentry. "That's a joke. Head-y. Get it?"

Shayne couldn't keep from smiling. "Yeah, you old warhorse, but this isn't the time to audition your stand-up routine. What happened?"

"Gas. I've had it all day. After you left, I told Cohn to take a seat while I took care of some unfinished business."

"A lucky move on your part."

"I had just finished when something happened. Felt like a 105 howitzer going off."

"A bomb," said Shayne. He pulled out a handkerchief and began cleaning the blood off his friend's forehead. "Did something hit you or did you fall into something?"

"I dunno," said the cop, groping for his forehead.

"What the hell happened?" said a voice from behind Shayne. "And what in hell is a civilian doing in here?"

The redhead looked up. A large man in a buttoned grey suit and short-cropped hair glared down.

"Who's this, Will?" said Shayne.

"My new Executive Assistant," said Gentry. "Art Poole."

"Major Poole," corrected the tall figure.

"Why don't you be a major help, Poole," said the redhead, "and get some paramedics over here."

The grey suit turned around and snapped his fingers.

Will Gentry reached out and squeezed Shayne's hand. "Whatever happens to me, Mike, you're the one man I can trust." He coughed up some blood. "I want you to do something for me."

"Name it," said the redhead, realizing his friend had some sort of internal bleeding.

"I know this is unprofessional of me, but get the bastards who did this—and Mike, make them pay."

III

A DECEMBER MOON HUNG PRECARIOUSLY LOW OVER THE Atlantic appearing as though it would momentarily disappear from view. Shayne stood motionlessly watching. He took a last, deep drag on his Camel, then tossed it in the water. His senses so alive, the quiet hiss as the butt extinguishing itself in Biscayne Bay sounded like an airgun in his ear.

His Seiko told him he had been waiting nearly an hour now. He had gone with the ambulance that had taken Will Gentry to Miami Mercy. The doctors had assured him that his old friend had indeed been lucky and was only being kept overnight for observation purposes as a precaution. Will's other visitor, Major Poole, had seemed more disappointed at that news than at Will's directive: "Art, I want you to cooperate with Mike to the fullest extent, and by damn, that's a direct order."

Shayne had doubted his friend's minor injuries were the byproduct of someone out for Ms. Graff. First, the hit was a pro job. Second, it was somebody familiar with Will's routine. Of course, anybody who read the papers could have figured that out. Third, although the MPD had no official bomb squad, a Sgt. Van Meter had verified the redhead's diagnosis of C-4.

"How'd they get hold of it?" had asked Gentry, insisting on running the force from his hospital bed.

"This is Miami, sir," answered Van Meter. "If you can afford it, you can get it."

Poole had added, "I've already communicated with the Army, and they have no record of any theft of the explosive from any facility in the area."

Who would want to kill Will? Obviously one of the twenty odd people in the waiting room. The detective scanned his memory, but the

only faces he could recall had been blown to bits. And to draw up a list of Will's enemies who had promised to get him could fill all the microfilm in the police department.

As soon as Mrs. Gentry had arrived at the hospital from their Bal Harbour home, Shayne, feeling uncomfortable, had left. Besides, he had reasoned, he could do Will more good on the street. The detective's usual sources of information, through, had been drier than Mrs. Gentry's favorite Melba toast, so he had driven down the Old Cutler Road out of Cocoanut Grove, parked the Buick near Fairchild Tropical Garden, walked out to the end of Dock 666, and turned on the red light.

In the distance he heard the big cabin cruiser slowly prowling its way up the Bay. Then he saw its lights. Like its owner, the boat travelled alone, and everybody in its path gave it a wide berth.

Gradually the forty-footer began to slow. As the *Charon* came almost to a stop, a hand appeared. Shayne grabbed it and was swung aboard. Immediately the craft accelerated.

A black man in a leather jacket and narrow tie let go of the redhead's hand and said, "I'll have to pat you down."

The detective stepped into the glow of one of the running lights.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Shayne. I'll go tell Mr. . . . "

"Don't bother, Oscar. I know the way."

"Very well, Mr. Shayne."

The staccato thumping of the sleek prow against the dark water had increased to machine-pistol speed as Shayne went below deck. He opened the cabin door. The salt-sea scent was replaced by that of lemon-laced wood blending with the mild aroma of tobacco. A single high-intensity lamp in the corner broke the almost-total darkness, its glow revealing a huge pair of black hands cradling a leather-bound volume.

"Good evening, Michael." The resounding voice rolled out at Shayne, deep enough, the detective decided, to make James Earl Jones sound like the lead singer in the Vienna Boys Choir.

"Hello, Rhadamanthus. I would have thought there was nothing left for you to read."

"Not to read, Michael, to savor. 'This sea that bares her bosom to the moon,/The winds that will be blowing at all hours,/And are upgathered now like sleeping flowers,/For this, for everything, we are out of tune.' Ah, would that I, not that Pantosocratic dreamer Coleridge, could have taken those walking tours with Wordsworth. May I offer you a choice smoke?" He unlatched a wooden box with a sculpted frieze of a mountain.

"No thanks."

"American-made, I assure you. I have tobacco grown on my farm in North Carolina and rolled by a blender in San Francisco."

"I'll stick to my own coffin nails."

"Precisely why you should switch. A good cigar is never inhaled."

"Maybe when I get my own farm in North Carolina."

The huge black man laughed deeply as he increased the volume on his stereo. "Recognize the music?"

Shayne listened. A throaty ballad by a female singer hung in the air like a tear. "Lady Billie Holiday, but the song isn't familiar."

"Of course it isn't, my friend. You are privy to a personal tape she made in her Paris club. After hours she would mellow out riding the great white horse and truly sing from her soul. Do you know what I had to do to obtain this *objet d'art?*"

"Spare me the sordid details. They might change my image of you as an ivory-tower patron of the arts."

Rhadamanthus laughed even more deeply. The sparring over, the two men settled in captains chairs on opposite sides of a chess board made of alternate squares of silver and gold.

The black man half-closed his eyes. "You're here about Chief Gentry."

Shayne nodded. If he had possessed doubts about Rhadamanthus' abilities, that comment had dispelled them. Whatever happened in Miami's underworld, it was whispered, the well-dressed black across from him knew it first. An almost mystical reputation surrounded the man. Nobody knew where or exactly when he had arrived in Miami. His background, where his boat docked, and his sources were likewise unknowns. One thing was certain—Rhadamanthus had the respect, no, the awe of all who knew him. Most crooks in this town came and went, but Rhadamanthus endured forever, perhaps because he operated as a loner, remaining aloof from entangling alliances and debts.

"The bombing is a mystery, Michael."

"You mean Miami's resident soothsayer, sage, an all-seeing eye is in the dark?"

"Figuratively and literally."

"That's strange," said Shayne, voicing his earlier suspicions. "This job has all the earmarks of a pro."

"Not really, Michael, not in a changing world. Didn't you read about the Princeton student who figured out how to make an atom bomb and published his findings? Anybody who can read and has access to the necessary components can join the Nuclear Club."

"But I smelled C-4. Your basic Ivy League student couldn't buy that

at the local Minit Market."

"You'd be surprised at why they call our city magic."

Shayne rasped his left thumbnail across a thick stubble. "Are you sure you don't know anything?"

"Michael, I am merely an arranger, an entrepreneur bringing together those with supplies and those with demands."

The detective was thinking aloud. "So if you don't get wind of it, it's not professional."

"Probably an amateur, probably a loner, probably an outsider, and the explosive in question might have been purchased at an emporium only recently gone into the illegal munitions business. As you know, I deal only at the corporate level. I have little time or interest in small affairs."

Shayne's muscles tightened. "Will Gentry's almost getting blown apart is no *small* affair."

The black man held out a hand laden with gold rings. "Don't be upset, my friend. I did not mean to suggest the life of a valued comrade is of no consequence." The voice had a soothing quality that belied the massive frame from which it rolled. "In fact, nobody of my professional acquaintance would go after the Chief."

"Why not?"

"Balance. Life is all a matter of balance. Chief Gentry is like a cosmic equalizer. He performs his duty without discrimination. Those in my profession know that, and yes, respect him for his incorruptible character. You see, Michael, without his presence open warfare would prevail as the various tribes vied for supremacy. Chief Gentry by going after each and all keeps everything in balance."

"Do you know of any 'new' businesses where a loner could get hold of enough explosive to redecorate the third floor of the MPD?"

Rhadamanthus fingered an ivory bishop. "Do you play?"

"No, not really," said the detective, noticing the precise detail on a chiseled rook.

"I suspect you'd do very well. It's a game of strategy, you know, though it never interested me either."

"Why?" said Shayne. "You've always been attracted to things of an intellectual nature."

The black man lay the bishop sideways on the ornate board. "Too many draws, Michael. In my business everything is either win or lose."

Shayne stood up. "So far today's been nothing but a loss."

Rhadamanthus walked over to a small writing table, withdrew a piece of parchment, and scribbled something with a quill. He handed the thick paper to the detective.

Shayne, feeling the boat decelerating, pocketed the parchment.

Rhadamanthus tilted his head so the high-intensity light caught his face, making it appear to blaze. "With the bishop down, Michael, it's up to the rook to maintain balance."

The redhead started out the door.

"Take heed, my friend," urged Rhadamanthus. "I cannot foresee the exact denouement of this match, but in the end there will be a definite winner and loser."

A chill started to crawl up Shayne's spine. It was not the kind of reassurance he needed to hear.

IV

SHAYNE FOLLOWED THE USUAL PROTOCOL. HE DIDN'T open the paper until he had been dropped off at the dock and darkness had swallowed the *Charon*. He understood Rhadamanthus's ethics well, though they had never discussed the problem. Somewhere down the line, however, the arranger could legitimately say, "No, I didn't *tell* Mike Shayne anything. We merely chatted about life in general."

The first address was located in Overtown, not too far from the MPD complex. If someone had obtained the explosive at this "emporium," as Rhadamanthus called it, he or she wouldn't have too far to go. Because of past experience, the redhead had not eliminated the so-called weaker sex as any less deadly.

When he got out of the car, he found a boarded-up storefront like so many in this perpetually burnt-out section. He studied the weathered plywood. Through the grime and spray paint the redhead made out a set of carefully spaced iron bars behind the wood.

A disguised rockhouse.

Suddenly a small peep-door popped open. A pair of steel eyes peered through. Shayne was close enough to see the discoloration on the metal. The weapon had recently been fired.

"'Chu want somethin', sucker?" said a hidden face from within.

"Explosives."

"Get outta my sight, my man, or Erwin here get nervous."

The barrels of the twelve gauge leveled on Shayne's gray eyes.

"Word I hear," said the redhead, cautiously prodding, "is you've got weapons for sale." The detective slowly pulled out a wad of bills wrapped around paper strips that he always kept in his sports coat pocket.

"Don't sell nuthin' to no ofay."

"I thought the only color you cared about was green, pal."

"I ain't no Equal Opportunity seller." The shotgun danced like a

coiling snake. "In ten seconds Erwin's gonna spit 'nuff shot so nobody can tell yo color. Get lost."

At fast speed Shayne replayed his visit to Gentry's office. The waiting room had been filled, and one important detail stood out—not a single non-white had been sitting there. He pivoted. Besides, Erwin had irrefutable logic on his side.

ON THE WAY TO THE SECOND ADDRESS IN NORTH MIAMI the detective sensed something wrong. The hairs on the back of his neck bristled as they always did when he was being followed. Who would have reason to tail him? Where had he been picked up? Had somebody spotted the wad of green he had been forced to flash?

As Shayne wheeled the Buick into the parking lot of the second address Rhadamanthus had given him, The Snack Shack, the thought hit him that the extent of the underworld's creativity was where they located their fronts. Staring at a neon lunchbox slowly rotating against the night sky, he wondered what should he order. A dressed cheeseburger with a side order of grenades? How about a Super-Deluxe Uzi, hold the laser sight?

He walked up to the stainless-steel counter. A semi-blonde with more zits than years smiled and said, "May I help you?"

"Maybe. Let me see your manager."

The girl disappeared through a door marked PRIVATE. Minutes later she reappeared with a paunchy, middle-aged man. The manager had shredded lettuce dangling from the right corner of his mouth and mustard spots on his t-shirt.

"What can I do you for, partner?" said the squat figure.

Shayne led him to an empty booth littered with napkins, cups, and ketchup packets. The two sat down. The manager stuck a toothpick between his two front teeth.

"I'm going to Central America in a week or two," said the redhead, "and I need the proper rations."

"I get your drift," said the manager through stained teeth. "Are you familiar with our Take-out Menu?

"Refresh me. What kind of explosive entrees are available?"

The fat man's lower lip pulled the toothpick into his mouth. "Powder, all the powder you could want."

"No," said Shayne. "Too hard to travel with. What about some primo playdough, standard Army issue?"

"C-4."

"Yeah."

"Sorry, partner, but it would be easier right now to outfit you with

S.N.A.R.K.'s."

"Hey, I'm not interested in blowing somebody out of the air."

"I know where you're coming from, but that cupboard's been bare for over a month."

"O.K., Mother Hubbard, where can I get some plastique?"

"Search me," said the manager, crushing a fly on his sweaty neck. "If you were talking tonnage, your basic banana republic revolution, you could touch base with a dude called Rhadamanthus. But for a one-man op, I just don't know."

Believing him, Shayne left. As he slid into the Buick's front seat, he caught a glimpse of a man in a green Chrysler parked across the lot. The detective pulled out slowly. He checked the mirror. The man in the Chrysler craned his neck, then cranked over his engine.

Shayne knew his instincts had been right. Someone was shadowing him.

He ripped the Buick into reverse and tromped on the accelerator.

The Chrysler tried to pull out from the parking slot, but Shayne cut it off, pinning the green sedan between his Buick and a chain-link fence.

The redhead jumped out and ran to the Chrysler. The .38 lept from the small of his back to its familiar place in his meaty palm. He stuck the revolver into the driver's face. "If you're not in the market for an instant facelift from Drs. Smith & Wesson, talk to me."

The small man with a toothbrush mustache straightened up. "Hold it, buddy. Just take it easy. I understand you want to buy. I want to sell."

"What do you have?"

"Not me. My boss. You still interested?"

"Yeah, if the price is right."

"I . . . I get a finder's fee up front," the figure stuttered, trying to shift his face away from the ever-present .38.

"If the deal goes down, you'll get your fee, but not up front. If something goes wrong, you'll get paid in grams, if you know what I mean."

The man shook his head. "Fol . . . follow me."

THE BUICK STAYED ON THE CHRYSLER'S TAIL. THEY crossed the Causeway and headed through Miami Beach. At another time the redhead might have enjoyed the moon-lit promenade which ran some twenty-five blocks along the beach below hotel row. They went through the Art Deco District, the blocks of apartments and small hotels that were a constant reminder of the Beach's hey-day in the 30's and 40's. Shayne was aware the green car ahead was violating the law

that the shortest distance between two points was a straight line. Maybe he was trying to make sure they were not followed.

The two cars passed the Hotel Cardozo and the Hotel Carlyle as well as the new clubs that were the heart of the city's trendy nightlife. Shayne continued down an alley and halted at the back of a store. The toothbrush mustache got out of the car. "Wait here."

Shayne slid the .38 into his lap and backed the Buick up against a building. He wanted to control as much of the unfamiliar territory as he could. A door opened down the line and a hand motioned him forward. He slipped the palmed Smith & Wesson into his pocket and started toward the building. A small sign on the door he entered read CIRCUITS MAXIMUS. He was standing in a dimly-lit, large room filled with cardboard boxes labelled Panasonic, Marantz, and Technics.

Beside the toothbrush mustache stood a tall, bald, and fat man, who said, "Maxwell tells me you have been unable to secure the supplies you desire."

"So far so good," said Shayne, wondering what really lay inside the mountains of boxes.

"Perhaps we can do business."

"How about starting with an act of good faith?"

"Faith?"

"I have an ex-partner I need to locate?"

"Why is that of any importance to me?"

"Because he may have bought something from you, and if that something gets traced back, you could be out of business before you really get started."

"How do you know we are new?"

"Sources."

The tall man lit up a thin cigar and began to pace. Shayne could see his ruse had struck a nerve.

"What did this ex-partner of yours look like?"

"He's easily recognizable by what he wanted to buy."

"Oh?"

"C-4."

The facial twitch was barely perceptible in the shadows, but Shayne caught it.

"Why would a somebody buying Army explosives be a threat to me?"

Shayne continued to roll the die. "Because Art is less stable than the C-4."

"Why do you care?"

"Two reasons. Art is a known associate, and Art stole the money from me to buy the stuff. Because of what he did with the stuff, the police are going to come after me through him."

The tall man twisted the cigar nervously between his lips. "What did Art do?"

"Removed the third floor from the MPD and put the Chief in the hospital. You know how the cops get when one of their own goes down."

"Shit," said the tall man, tossing the cigar down and grinding it out.

"Every business has its growing pains," said the detective.

"Suppose your friend Art had purchased the material in question from me. What do you propose to do about it?"

"Since the chain of evidence eventually leads to me, I'm going to remove a link."

"Take out your ex-partner."

"On the nose, pal," said Shayne.

"Why don't you wait outside while I talk this development over with my associates. I don't suppose you can back up this tale of yours?"

"If you want a character reference, pal, ask Rhadamanthus whether the big redhead can get the job done."

From the way the mustache and the tall man turned toward each other, Shayne knew he had said the secret word. So where was the duck with the $100?

Cautiously Shayne worked his way down the corridor and back to the Buick. Instinctively he opened the hood and checked beneath. Then he looked under the car and the front seat. Nothing. Maybe the munitions dump was just what it seemed, more of a white-collar operation. Still he flipped open the .38. Six slugs nestled in their chambers.

The toothbrush mustache approached the Buick before the detective was half way through the Camel. He handed the redhead a piece of paper on which was written a telephone number. "Mr. Avery says whether or not you get your job done, don't come back."

SHAYNE DROVE DOWN THE STREET UNTIL HE SPOTTED A payphone. He parked across from Z, the new nightspot, and dialed the number. No answer. He dialed again. Nothing.

He put through a call to Miami Mercy and Will's room. Mrs. Gentry answered. He asked for his friend. Before she could hang up, Shayne heard the Chief's voice.

"Mike, that you?"

"Yeah. How you feeling?"

"Terrific, but they won't let me out till morning."

"Got any leads on the bombing."

"Dead end. All Graff's records of who was in the waiting room this afternoon were destroyed, and of course she was the only one to see them, and . . . "

"I know. Listen, I might just have something, but you've got to let me follow this one out by myself."

"O.K. Talk to me."

"I'm going to give you my number and then another Beach number. Can you find out whose it is?"

"Sure. Catch you in five."

While he waited, the detective watched the Mercedes crowd enter the disco. Leather minis were in, he decided. He saw one so short that it could have passed for a wide belt.

The phone rang and he picked it up.

"Mike, the number belongs to a pay phone located on Pendleton between Harper and Row."

"Thanks, Will. I'll be in touch."

It took less than fifteen minutes for Shayne to find the location. Right in front of a motel. He was staring at a building whose popularity must have peaked in the 50's. Both it and his lead seemed like dead ends.

V

SHAYNE LEANED TIREDLY AGAINST THE PHONE BOOTH. He had been running on adrenalin and anger, trying to fulfill Will's request. The whole thing had been based on a slim thread—that the bomber had bought the C-4 in Miami and not brought it in. Still, when the choices were slim and none, he'd go with slim every time.

"Go ahead and use the phone, young fella," urged a voice from the shadows in front of the motel.

Shayne stared toward The Silver Swordfish. Beneath a low-watt, yellow bulb he could barely make out an old man reading a book.

"Anybody can use the phone now that 204's gone," continued the old man. "You just go right ahead."

"What?" said the redhead, not really comprehending what the speaker meant.

"Fella may as well have rented that booth from me as a room. Spent most of his time holding change in one hand and the receiver in the other."

"What'd he look like?"

"Don't rightly know. Each time I seen him I wuz wearin' my cheaters to study this book. He coulda been Andy Rooney or Mickey Rooney, and I couldn't a told the difference."

The detective approached the enshadowed figure. Wearing a flannel shirt, pajama bottoms, and Ben Franklins, he was perched in a wicker rocker. The book in his small hands was *The Principles of Accounting*.

Noticing the focal point of Shayne's eyes, the old man said, "Gonna get me one of them C.P.A.'s some day, but this stuff don't make much sense. I mean, this here book claims a credit is something against your account. Way I always heard it is credit is something positive. You know, 'he's a credit to his profession.' Oh well, I guess that's why you got to go to school."

Shayne chuckled to himself. "Tell me about 204."

"Stayed here a week."

"Stayed?"

"Checked out about nightfall."

"Damn," said the redhead.

"Don't you go cussing in front of yer elders."

"No, sir," said Shayne. "Can you tell me anything about this guy?"

"Well, he was real secretive. Like I said, he spent most of his time at that phone yonder. Went back to his room occasionally. Eat and relieve himself, I 'spect."

"Did he ever leave your motel?"

"Coupla times."

"Any idea where he went?"

"Nope."

"Did he leave it today before checking out?"

"Yep. This morning. Then he came back, spent some time up there, checked out, and left."

"Did he fill out a registration card?"

"Don't use those things. That's one reason my accountant told me I ought to be reading this book."

Shayne rasped his thumbnail across the thick stubble. "What was he driving?"

"Case you can't tell, The Silver Swordfish don't got no valet service."

"What about the license plate? In-state?"

"Out."

"Remember where?"

"Let's see. It was white. Tennessee, maybe Kentucky. One of those."

"You mind if I look at his room?"

"I don't make no money giving away rooms."

Shayne pulled out his wallet. "You could rent it to me."

"By the day, hour, or week?"

"The hour."

"Day's cheaper. Twenty bucks."

Shayne handed him a bill.

"Key's in my office 'hind me on a board. Oh, Wanda, my cleaning lady, ain't showed up yet, but I don't 'spect you be wanting to sleep in it."

Shayne nodded.

"Say, you understand inventory? What's this procedure 'first in, last out.'"

Shayne grinned. "It means you'll probably outlive me."

"Those numbers I understand," said the old man with half a smile.

THE DETECTIVE FOUND 204 AN ABSOLUTE HOLE, AND that was before the last occupant took over. Only a desperate or broke man would have checked in. Every newspaper from the previous week was scattered over the room, creating the appearance that the dweller had a pet with a problem. Cardboard boxes and soiled bags suggested 204 had sampled every fast-food delicacy in the area. Big Mac, the Colonel, Whoppers. The smell of cigarettes hung in the room like cobwebs.

Shayne reached into his pocket and slipped on a pair of Isotoners. He would Will send a crime lab team over later, but he didn't want to have to wait for the reports to come back.

All the drawers were empty. Ashtrays overflowed with unfiltered Luckies. He read through every newspaper. Nothing had been underlined or torn out. On a hunch he grabbed one of the Metro phonebooks and flipped to the pages containing the listings for municipal offices. His hunch paid off. The page with the number for the MPD headquarters on N.W. Second had been ripped out.

He grabbed the Miami Beach volume. Turning to a page toward the middle, he noticed a thick black line under Circuits Maximus. The guy in room 204 was definitely his man. Of course the bomber hadn't used the motel room phone. Then the manager would have had a record of all calls.

Shayne continued his search. Under the bed he found nothing. He walked into the towel-covered bathroom and sorted through the refuse. Nothing but some disposable razors and a bottle of Old Spice.

The trash basket in the main room yielded nothing but cola cans and candy wrappers. Shayne was about ready to leave when he noticed something wadded up behind the TV. A piece of rumpled plastic. He smoothed it out. It resembled an oversized sandwich bag. Taped to the plastic was a slip of pink paper containing several sets of numbers and

in block letters the word Sears.

WHEN THE NEIGHBORHOOD SEARS OPENED THE NEXT morning, Shayne was their first customer. He had waited at The Silver Swordfish until Will's lab boys had arrived. The Army had promised to send over a dog that had been trained to sniff out explosives. The redhead had no doubt what Rin Tin Tin would find. Even an agent from the Miami office of the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms had arrived.

With only three hours of sleep behind him, the redhead found himself at the Customer Service Desk confronting a college kid.

"My wife bought me this gift," explained the detective, "for my birthday. It doesn't fit. You'd think she'd know my size after ten years of marriage."

The kid laughed.

"Can I bring it back?" Shayne handed over a photocopy of the slip he had found.

The kid examined the form. "Well, it wasn't bought here, but sure. No problem."

"That's strange. She usually shops here."

"This is a retail store. Your merchandise was ordered through one of our catalogue stores."

Shayne feigned incredulity. "No kidding. You can tell that, huh? Just for curiosity's sake, where did she get it?"

"Small town probably." The kid tapped a few keys on his computer terminal. "Your wife been on a trip lately?"

"Matter of fact, she went to see her mother."

"Does her mother live in Tennessee?"

Shayne nodded.

"You see these five numbers? They tell me that shirt of yours was bought in Crosse City."

A dead end had suddenly been brought back to life.

VI

BY LATE AFTERNOON SHAYNE HAD DELTA-ED FROM Miami International to Atlanta to Knoxville. At his destination he rented a car for the drive southwest. Unfortunately, the only vehicle available was a subcompact. For an hour he felt as though his knees were in his mouth. At dusk when he turned off I-75 for Crosse City, he had the funny feeling that when he climbed out of the Chevette twelve other clowns ought to follow him.

After he crossed a river, he found a sign that proclaimed CROSSE-

VILLE—THE HOLIEST LITTLE TOWN IN TENNESSEE. A few miles later a banner stretched across the road announced a county-wide religious revival to be led by the Reverend Amos Crosse. Obviously the Bible belt was buckled very securely around the community, and the Crosse family had been dong the tightening for a while.

Strangely he hadn't noticed any motel, gas stations, or restaurants on the way into town, not even a Crazy Joe's Firecrackers franchise. By the time he reached the edge of Crosse City, daylight had completely disappeared, and thick fog was beginning to settle in for the night. At the center of town a stone obelisk arose from a square. Surrounding it were the only stores he had yet spotted. He continued around the square until he came to the Sears. Like the rest of the shops, it was closed.

Shayne rolled down the Chevette's window. The smell of rotten eggs suddenly singed his nostrils. Sulfur. Somewhere close by, if he didn't miss his guess, a paper mill was operating. Like so many other small Southern towns, Crosse City had probably grown up around a river. Once they had most likely shipped logs down it, and the factory had become its chief, perhaps its solitary industry.

The only light emanated from a three-story building across the street. He pulled the car in between a pair of pickups. A gooseneck light illuminated a sign cut into stone, THE GREER. He walked up concrete steps through a double door into what seemed a 19th-century hotel held together by 20th-century paint. He checked his watch. 6:10.

"Things close down pretty early around here," he said to the clerk.

Without looking up from his paper, the man pulled up the shirt sleeves of his starched and collarless white shirt. "Folks herebouts like to get in bed early. First shift starts at 6:00 A.M."

"What time does the Sears open up?"

"Joyce Lynn picks up a thermos of coffee here and is ready for business at nine sharp."

"Well, I guess I'm stuck here for the night."

"Hey, mister, some folks like it around here, like it a bunch."

"I didn't mean . . . " said Shayne, before deciding to skip the matter. "You got a room?"

"The Greer's got twenty-two of them, mister."

"Any of them empty?"

"Nope. They all got furniture in them. Indoor plumbing's not extry either."

Shayne controlled himself. "I mean 'occupied'."

"Oh yeah, we got vacancies."

"Got one that doesn't face South toward the paper mill?"

"Why?"

"The smell."

"What smell?" The man flipped the rangy redhead a key that read 309. "Elevator hasn't worked since '49. Stairway's over there."

Shayne reached for the heavy key. A hand came down on his. "That'll be twenty-five dollars, in advance. Learned a long time ago not to trust passers-through."

The detective peeled off the bills and picked up the key. "Where can I get something to eat?"

"Hotel coffee shop. Try the fish, but you'll have to hurry. Sarah closes down the grill at 7:00, 'cept tomorrow of course."

"Tomorrow?"

"Sure. First night of the revival. Reverend Crosse ends his fast, and the sparks will fly like always."

"I see. Revival's a big thing around here?"

"Bigger than the county fair—even bigger than a Big Orange homecoming."

"Thanks," said Shayne, half expecting a chorus of "Bringing in the Sheaves" to accompany him as he climbed the staircase.

AFTER THE DETECTIVE HAD WASHED UP, HE HEADED FOR the coffee shop. Nearly every one of the twenty or so black-Formica tables had been taken. Shayne found an empty stool at the end of the long counter and pulled a plastic menu from between the empty napkin container and a messy bottle of ketchup.

"Can I help you?" a voice said.

Shayne looked up. She was prettier than the soiled pink uniform should have allowed. Long, blonde hair curled atop her flawless complexion.

"How 'bout some coffee?" she said through a set of cover-girl teeth.

Too old to be a teenager, Shayne decided, she had the kind of freshness that belied small-town boredom. The redhead repressed an urge to ask her the cliched "What's-a-nice-girl-like-you" question. "Black, thanks."

As she filled the cup, she said, "You a salesman?"

"No."

"You got relatives here?"

"No." He smiled through the coffee steam.

"Look, nobody just passes through Crosse City. That's why the hotel is always so empty."

Shayne glanced over his shoulder at the crowd. "Empty?"

"Oh, these are all local people. Some of 'em work the graveyard shift down at the paper mill. Others just come in cause their parents did. Habit, you know. Now, come on, mister, what're you doing here?"

Shayne cradled the warm china in his hands. "You seem awfully certain I'm not just—what is it the song says—a poor, wayfaring stranger."

She laughed shrilly, almost disdainfully. "Crosse City isn't on the way to any place, and Miss Emily won't sell the land to outsiders." She took out her pad and magically produced a pencil from her hair. "I give up. What is your business?"

"Make that a steak, rare, smothered in mushrooms and onions. Baked potato, butter. Salad, oil and vinegar, and a cold beer."

She looked up from her scribbling. "Sorry. Crosse City's dry. You've got to go out of Bell County to get liquor."

"Then make it a Coke."

"Hey, honey," called a deep voice from down the counter, "come on over here and shake that pretty menu of yurn for me. I'm not a stranger."

"And I'm not your honey either, Horace," she snapped.

Shayne looked down at a table where three men were sitting.

"Got you good, Horace, old son," said a bearded man in a t-shirt and down vest as he slapped the shoulder of his companion.

"Shut up, Newt," said Horace, who was wearing a green t-shirt and cut-off fatigue jacket. He jerked the arm off his shoulder. "I said, git over here, Kari—now."

The pink-uniformed girl headed around the counter to the table. "O.K., Horace, what can I do for you?"

The big man stubbed out his unfiltered cigarette as he whispered something in her ear.

The slap cracked against his face like a whip. "Why can't you treat me like a lady sometimes? Like he did?" she said, gesturing at the redhead.

"Well, I'll be," said Horace. "You guys, we got a real gentleman in our presence. That right, buddy?" he yelled at Shayne.

The detective nursed his coffee. His cramped muscles and tired eyes didn't need any recreation.

Soon the local trio paid for their meal and left. A few minutes later the waitress appeared. "Mister, Bernie—he's the cook—wants to talk to you. He's about got your steak ready, and he wants to be sure it's not overcooked before he sends it out." She pointed to a set of swinging doors.

The redhead lifted himself off the stool. "O.K."

As he walked through the doors, it occurred to him that the clerk had told him the cook's name was Sarah.

A pair of hands grabbed him and shoved him against a stainless steel cupboard.

Horace stood in his face, a butcher's knife in his hand.

VII

HORACE SAID, "LISTEN, SIR GALAHAD, WE DON'T NEED no knight in shining armor around here."

Shayne smirked. "Why? Trying to keep the Holy Grail to yourself?"

"What's he talking about?" said Newt, who was standing behind the knife-wielder.

"Maybe I ought to use this little sword of mine to cut that smart tongue outta your mouth," said Horace. "What'a you think, boys?"

Two blank faces nodded in agreement, and Kari disappeared back into the restaurant.

"Look, guys," said the redhead, "I just want to eat my steak and get a good night's sleep."

"Well, I think we can accommodate you, Galahad. In fact, I think we'll just feed it to you."

Shayne's muscles tensed and his eyebrows furrowed. "You don't want to try, pal."

Newt grabbed the steak off the platter with his dirty hands and advanced toward the redhead. As the hot meat came at his face, the detective grabbed the down-vested figure by the wrist and in the same motion turned it inward.

Newt ended up with a steak in his face and a sore wrist.

Horace said angrily, "Give me one good reason I shouldn't carve you up."

Shayne gave him two—a finger in each eye.

Horace jumped back and clutched his face. The knife thudded on the wooden floor. "I can't see," he screamed. "I can't see. Do something."

The third man did. He turned and ran toward the double doors. Shayne stuck out his foot. "Nothing like loyalty to friends."

The burly local sprawled into the entranceway, picked himself up, and was gone. A gasp came from one of the supper crowd.

Newt reached blindly behind his back for a weapon and came up with a whisk.

At that moment Shayne could hear Greg Chen saying to him, "In the hands of a man with imagination, anything can be a weapon." Somehow, the redhead figured, if his martial arts sensei were to see Newt

standing there with droopy eyes and a gaping mouth handling the whisk like Julia Child gone mad, he might retract that statement. But it was doubtful Newt qualified as "a man with imagination."

"Beat up any eggs lately, old son?" said Shayne to Newt.

The local, beginning to realize how ridiculous he looked, gave Shayne a weak grin.

The detective grabbed the whisk from the motionless figure and jammed it into his ample midsection. Newt bent over, grabbing his stomach with a moan. Maybe Greg Chen was right after all, decided Shayne as his knee put Newt out of his embarrassment. The head snapped back and he tumbled against the sink. It was a tossup whether he'd recover his breath or consciousness first.

Horace's meaty palm spun Shayne around. Eyes watering, the local swung a haymaker at the detective's head.

Shayne blocked the punch easily and threw a stiff right into his opponent's stomach. Horace sprawled into a stainless steel table covered with desserts.

Grabbing the gasping figure by the fatigue jacket, Shayne jerked him upright. "Had enough, pal?"

Horace nodded. Shayne relaxed his grasp. The local took a step backward. His hand dropped to his side, then came up abruptly. This time it held a wooden rolling pin.

The detective yanked the metal lid from a garbage can.

Horace swung the club at Shayne's head.

The detective shielded himself with the lid. The force of the blow caved in the metal and pushed the redhead back into the wall.

Horace pressed his attack, swinging his weapon wildly.

Shayne suddenly dropped to one knee, his left hand holding the lid above him. With his right he punched straight ahead. His fist caught Horace in the groin.

The local doubled over. Shayne rose, straightening up Horace with a forearm shiver.

"Hold it!" called a strange voice from the doorway.

A heavy-set man with a salt-and-pepper mustache raised an assault pump. Behind the shotgun Shayne saw a silver badge.

Horace lifted a fist.

The law officer pumped the weapon. "I said hold it, Horace."

The detective was careful not to move.

"This guy started a fight, Jessie," said the local.

The uniform spit the stub of a cigar into the open garbage can. "Sure, Horace, a stranger lured you and Newt into the kitchen on the promise of a piece of Sarah's pecan pie and tried to beat the both of

you to death with a trash-can lid." He spit into the can again. "Come to think of it, that last part might not be such a bad idea."

"Jessie, how come you're always hounding me and the boys?"

"How come the limit of your staying out of trouble is about a week?"

Horace rubbed his crotch, his mouth involuntarily grimacing. "Well, what are you going to do about it, sheriff? Tell my daddy?" He laughed sarcastically.

The sheriff tapped the tip of the barrel against Horace's chest. "Last warning. One more call and you'll be the guest of the city for longer than either of us wants. Now you and Newt get lost."

As the two men dragged themselves past him and out the door, the sheriff extended his hand to Shayne. "Jessie Bowdrie. Sorry about the Welcome Wagon there. Horace's always had a wheel loose, but most folks around here are at least a tad more hospitable than him."

"No harm, no foul," said the redhead, shaking the hand.

"I'm glad you took it that way. Why don't you at least let the city pay for your meal."

"Thanks, but I've lost my appetite. I think I'll just go upstairs and sack out."

"None of my business what you're doing here," said the sheriff, lighting up another cigar, "but just remember I'm always around." He smiled through yellow teeth.

WILL GENTRY WAS STANDING BENEATH A CRACKED CONcrete ceiling that was starting to crumble on top of him when Shayne heard the loud noise. He sat up in the bed with a start. Somebody was knocking on his door.

"Mister," said a voice, "I know you're in there."

It was Kari. Shayne groped for his pants.

"I just want you to know I had to do it."

The redhead slid his legs in.

"If I hadn't, well I couldn't have worked any more."

"Just a minute," he called.

"Gotta go now."

When Shayne threw open the door, the hallway was empty.

THE DETECTIVE ATE ONE OF THE BIGGEST BREAKFASTS of his life. Steak, 'biskettes and gravee,' grits, and enough coffee to wake him up. The remainder of his night's sleep had been restless, but uninterrupted. The older woman who was the hotel's only waitress told him Kari had called in sick. The redhead made a mental note to talk to

his midnight visitor as soon as he finished his primary business.

At 9:00 when the Sears sign was turned to OPEN, Shayne walked in. A matronly woman with short, silver hair sat behind the counter sipping coffee from a thermos. The redhead handed her his photocopy. "Was this bought here?" he inquired.

"You bet," she said. Her finger traced over the paper. "Some kind of shirt. On sale, too."

"Can you tell me who bought it?"

The woman looked up at the detective. Shayne could feel her sizing him up and sensed some resistance. She handed him back the slip.

"I'd like to," she said.

"But?"

"I don't think I should."

"Why not?"

"Well, it's private business."

"I've got the sales slip. It was ordered here."

"But not by you."

"So?"

She stared down into her coffee. Without looking at him, she said, "I'm just the manager."

"I don't . . . "

"I don't own the store. I think you should talk to the owner."

"Who's that?" The redhead found himself growing impatient. He knew he was on the verge of something, but couldn't make the breakthrough.

"Miss Emily."

"Who?"

"You really *are* a stranger. Miss Emily Greer."

THE CHEVETTE STRAINED UP THE DIRT ROAD. THE LOGging trail through the tall loblolly pines was the way Sheriff Bowdrie had told him to take, so Shayne followed a rut made earlier by what he guessed from the tire-tracks was a pickup. "You can follow old 25 around Greer Mountain, but that way'll take you forever."

Suddenly the road emerged behind a huge white barn that gleamed in the sunlight like a church. In a large, fenced field several horses grazed. Shayne stopped the car. From this perch he could see through the still-hanging fog the Tennessee River cutting through the valley below. He felt momentarily like an explorer just discovering a new land.

He looked around. Directly beyond the barn stood a bright, white mansion. Six columns supporting an overhead balcony caused the redhead to recall the antebellum Southern homes of the previous century.

Quite a contrast to the small, dirty town below, thought the detective.

He pulled the Chevette onto a circular drive and headed toward the house. Yellow flecked the thick forsythia as though it wanted to bloom prematurely. As he parked the car and got out, Shayne inhaled deeply. Not a trace of sulphur.

He stepped onto the porch, walked down indoor-outdoor carpeting to the door, and knocked. Several minutes passed with no response. He hit the brass knocker even harder, feeling the echoes in his chest.

Slowly the tall door swung open. Standing there was a sleepy-eyed, bare-chested man he knew.

Horace.

VIII

HORACE *GREER?* WONDERED THE REDHEAD.

"What'a ya want?" said the sleepy-eyed, slowly-moving figure.

Shayne had seen the look before, and it wasn't produced by not getting a good eight-hours. Horace had the distant stare, the sluggish reflexes, and the runny nose of a regular at one of the shooting galleries that lined Miami's Junk Alley. "I'm here to see . . . "

"Go away. It's too early for salesmen."

The redhead suddenly realized that the man who only the night before had wanted to slit his throat didn't even recognize him. "I'm looking for Miss Emily Greer."

"Ah, Miss Emily. Everybody wants to see Miss Emily. Always have, always will." He raised a hand to his mouth as if confiding in the detective. "Shh, she's a very important person around here. Well, mother dear is not here. Hey, that rhymes. I suppose she got an early start on one of her causes."

"Do you know which one?"

"Let's see." Horace looked up and fell against the doorjamb. "Who knows?" Then he threw his hands up into the air. "Hallelujah, brother! The revival. How could I forget that blessed event. Mommy doubtless has descended to the high school in order to supervise the natives in setting up the auditorium for our beloved minister's yearly reappearance."

"Thanks," said Shayne, glad to get away without any problem.

"You ain't any good, you know," Horace shouted after him. "Been here five minutes and ain't even sold me Volume A of the encyclopedia."

A GIANT WOODEN CUT-OUT OF A WHITE KNIGHT ON horseback wearing a red cross welcomed the detective to Crosse City

High School, HOME OF THE CRUSADERS. Shayne wheeled the Chevette over the cracked blacktop to a large brick and concrete building. Only a few pickups and cars sat in the lot. One automobile stood out. A BMW sedan occupied a slot marked RESERVE.

The inside had the scrubbed look of a typical school. The hallway was empty and his footsteps echoed off the locker-lined walls. In the distance the detective could hear faint voices.

The auditorium contained the only activity in the otherwise vacant school building. A group of blue-jeaned, flannel-shirted men set up folding chairs while several women in sweatshirts and bandanas arranged flowers on the raised stage and hung curtains behind it. From a nearby room intermittent hymns suggested a choir rehearsing.

Nobody seemed to notice the redhead as he walked around the huge auditorium. After two minutes Shayne would have made book on which woman was Emily Greer. Standing to one side of the stage, a tall, statuesque brunette seemed to orchestrate every movement by the workers. A raised hand, a smile, a word or two—all moved the busy men and women as if they were marionettes responding to a puppeteer.

The detective walked to the bottom of the small staircase leading onto the stage. "Miss Greer?" he said to the woman standing above him searching for anything that might not be quite right.

"Why, yes," she responded with a smile and a crisp, alto voice.

When she turned and faced him directly, Shayne could see that the woman, probably in her mid-forties, was strikingly beautiful. Unlike the females around her, she had a short, precise haircut that reminded the redhead of Bal Harbour *haute couture.* She must have been nearly six-feet tall, and most of that was legs. A long, narrow skirt and a knit sweater that seemed molded for her body accented her height. "I'm Mike Shayne," he said.

"Ah, the stranger in town Jessie mentioned to me. What can I do for you, Mr. Shayne?"

"I came up from Miami yesterday . . . "

"Ah, Miami," she interrupted. "The Magic City. When I was a young girl, my father took me there quite often. Even lied to my principal, quite shamefully I might add, to get me out of school in midweek." Her deep-set eyes grew distant. Abruptly she said, "What brings you all the way to Crosse City?"

Shayne pulled out his license and extended his arm upward. "I'm a private investigator working on a case."

"My heavens, I've never met a real investigator." She clutched her bosom. "Tell me, Mr. Shayne, is the life of a private eye really as exciting as in the movies?"

"Well," he smiled, a bit embarrassed, "not usually. Hollywood tends to glamorize the job. You're the first beautiful woman I've run into in almost a month, and 95% of what I do is chasing down what may or may not be a lead."

"Separating the wheat from the chaff, as the Good Book says. Which brought you here?"

"I'm hoping you'll be able to tell me."

"Me," she said with surprise flooding her expertly made-up face.

"I understand you own the local Sears."

"Yes, father left me rather comfortably set." She sat down on the top step and smoothed the bright skirt over her knees with a long-fingered hand. "Sometimes I don't know whether it's a blessing or a curse. A solitary woman having to handle so many different assets, well . . . but about your problem?"

"The Sears manager told me that she couldn't release some information without your permission."

"What kind of information?"

Shayne held up the catalogue invoice. "I need to know who made this purchase."

"May I ask you something about your case?"

Shayne nodded.

"Is the information really that important?"

"Enough to bring me from Miami."

"Why do you need this particular information?"

"Without getting into specifics, a close friend nearly died, and I think the person whose name I need could be involved."

Disbelief etched her face. "Somebody in Crosse City is responsible for something like that?"

"I'm not sure. The information might tell me."

She stood up and gracefully descended the stairs. Touching Shayne on the elbow, she said, "Then by all means we must find out. Come with me."

They walked into a small room marked LOUNGE. The woman picked up the phone and pressed the touch-tone. "Hello. Yes, Joyce Lynn, it's Emily. I want you to do something for me." She motioned for the invoice. "Do whatever you do and get me the name on this order."

She read the numbers slowly, then waited. Her eyes travelled across the room to the investigator and over him. "Tell me, Mr. Shayne, is the Crescent Hotel still standing in Miami Beach? That's where Father and I always stayed on our little trips."

"No. I'm afraid they tore it down a few years ago to make way for a

condo development."

"Oh, what a shame. I have such fond memories of that place. The Parisienne Restaurant, the little wooden swings outside, the brilliant purple bougainvillea . . . What Joyce? Oh my. Thank you."

She hung up very slowly and turned to Shayne. "This is embarrassing."

"Why?"

"You see, I'm the one who placed this order."

IX

THE WOMAN WHO SECONDS AGO HAD APPEARED TO Shayne so much in control collapsed into a metal folding chair. Sometimes, he had learned, in such people who strove for perfection the least little chink in the armor seemed like a gaping hole. "Are you certain you did?" he said gently.

She covered her eyes. "Those numbers on the invoice mean nothing to me, but when Joyce Lynn told me I had ordered the item, I remembered doing it."

"What was it?"

"A beautiful black chamois shirt."

"For yourself?"

"Oh no! It was a Christmas gift."

"For whom?" It was an illusion, Shayne knew, but like a frightened turtle she seemed to draw up into herself.

"No, he couldn't have. Not him."

"Who is *he?*"

She sat there as though she were the only person in the room. The detective felt a certain amount of compassion for her and her situation, but that emotion was over-ridden by the powerful memory of that moment when he had seen the MPD explosion. "Miss Greer, I know this is hard, that you're probably protecting a friend, but I will find out. You see, somebody connected with this shirt was involved with a bombing that almost killed one of my best friends. This isn't just another case—this is personal."

She looked up and sighed audibly. Her teeth clasped her lower lip and chewed. "I didn't realize. You're right. I know that. I just can't picture him doing it."

The detective's steel-gray eyes pinned her to the chair as he repeated, "He?"

"Amos, Amos Crosse."

"The Reverend."

"Yes, but when . . . did this . . . bombing take place?"

"Two days ago."

She exhaled loudly and stood up. "Thank God."

"What do you mean?"

She laughed nervously in short bursts. "You see Amos couldn't have had anything to do with something that happened in Miami on Thursday."

"Why?"

"He's been on retreat. Every Christmas Eve Amos drives up to his cabin in Fielding Hollow and remains there until it's time for the New Year Revival. On my way here today I stopped by the church. He had just that minute gotten back and was preparing himself for tonight."

"What do you mean 'retreat'?"

"For the last ten or so years, he has driven up there and spent a week alone praying and fasting, cleansing his soul, awaiting inspiration." Her eyes widened. "Wait a minute, you don't think Amos went to Miami rather than his retreat?"

"Right now I don't know. I need to talk with the Reverend Crosse."

"That won't be possible."

"Why?" The redhead's impatience was rising in direct proportion to the roadblocks.

"It's important that no one see him until the service tonight."

"You did."

"Emily," came a woman's voice from the lounge doorway, "Jake is having trouble getting enough poinsettias and needs to talk to you."

"I'll be right there, Maude." She turned to Shayne. "Any questions you have for Amos will just have to wait until after he delivers his message."

Shayne exploded involuntarily. "Like hell it will. Now, how do I get to his church?"

When Emily Greer walked over to him, she barely had to look up to stare into the redhead's eyes. Her voice rang with the authority of one used to giving orders. "Leave Amos alone!"

THE SMALL, WHITE-FRAME CHURCH BUILDING PERCHED precariously on the side of a steep hill. A thin coil of smoke slithered from the black stovepipe in its rear. The guy at Sammy's Chevron, Shayne was grateful, had given him good directions.

As he stepped out of the Chevette, the investigator felt the cold for the first time. He was glad he had brought his infrequently used stadium coat with him on the trip north as it might be his first time in years to see snow.

As if on cue, a few soft flakes drifted down from the layer of gray

clouds that covered the area. The leafless trees on the hill stood like naked, brown pitchforks. The cold from the ground penetrated his shoes. For the first time since leaving Miami's palms and sunshine, Shayne really felt like a poor wayfaring stranger.

The freezing mud crackled beneath his loafers as he headed toward the building's back door. He passed a gray Olds sedan, its white plate so covered with dirt the numbers were almost invisible. Shayne climbed the short stoop and knocked. Heavy breathing and the clang of metal from the inside were his only answer.

He knocked again.

The door opened quickly. A husky man with a sweat-soaked warm-up filled the doorway. "Can I help you?"

"You're the Reverend Crosse?"

"Yes. And you?"

"Mike Shayne. Could I talk with you for a minute?"

"Well, I was just getting ready to . . . of course. Come in."

Shayne stepped inside and the man closed the door. A vented heater threw little warmth into sparse quarters.

"What can I do for you?" said the minister, wrapping a towel around his neck.

"It's about a shirt." Shayne, noticing the weight bench and a set of barbells, placed the load around three hundred and fifty pounds.

Crosse said, "You'll have to excuse the mess, but I try to keep in shape. Can I offer you a snack?"

On a small table sat a tray filled with carrot sticks, celery stalks, nuts, cheese, and raisins. Shayne took two carrot sticks.

"Good for you. So much better than all that red meat the Scriptures warn us against." Using his celery, he shoveled up some chopped nuts. "What's this about a shirt?"

"A black chamois. A Christmas present from Emily Greer."

"Emily?"

"She told me that she bought you the shirt for Christmas from the local Sears."

The minister picked up a baby bell, placed his elbow on his desk, and began to curl. "Mr. Shayne, I don't want to sound rude, but why are you so concerned about a shirt you say Emily Greer gave me."

"Because the person who had the shirt tried to kill a good friend of mine."

"Where did this attempt take place?"

"Miami." Shayne fought off an urge to light a Camel. "I understand you've been on a retreat this last week."

"Yes."

"Any witnesses?"

"Only God Himself. Surely you don't suspect . . . "

"Right now all I know is that somebody is lying."

"I repeat, I did not receive that shirt."

"Who did?" The redhead crossed his arms and faced the sweating figure.

Without warning the door burst open behind the detective.

His shotgun pointing straight ahead, Sheriff Bowdrie said, "Round this part of the country, Shayne, we don't take kindly to outsiders threatening our preacher."

X

"JESSIE!" SAID REVEREND CROSSE. "WHAT ARE YOU DOing here? I mean, you *are* an infrequent visitor to our church."

Sheriff Bowdrie's muscles relaxed and his shotgun pointed at the floor. "Maude Perkins overheard Shayne here tell Miss Emily that he was on his way up to see you. The way she described it, your life was in danger. I guess Maude over-reacted or misunderstood something."

"I'm not a fearful man," said the minister. "Once you've spent a Saturday afternoon trying to run into the Alabama defensive line, even the Valley of the Shadow of Death doesn't look so bad."

"You're a better man than I am," commented Shayne. "One glance at the action end of the Sheriff's gun is good enough for me."

The salt-and-pepper mustache stood his Browning in the corner.

"If you two don't mind," said Crosse, "I've got to get ready for tonight, and after a week in the woods, I think my preparations ought to start with a shower."

"Amen," said the sheriff.

"See how easy it is, Jessie," said the minister with a wry grin. "I expect to see you there tonight."

Bowdrie cleared his throat and picked up his weapon. "Come on, Shayne. I'll buy you a cup of coffee—that is, unless you think the Reverend is your bomber."

Shayne was surprised. "I didn't mention it to you. How did you know I was looking for a bomber?"

It was Jessie Bowdrie's turn to smile. "Good news travels fast in a small town, and bad news, faster."

HOUSED IN THE BASEMENT OF THE BELL COUNTY COURThouse, the office was empty except for the redhead and Bowdrie. The sheriff filled the detective's orange mug that said VOLS with surprisingly good coffee. Maybe, thought Shayne, Bowdrie could give Will

Gentry some brewing lessons.

"You lived here long?" said the redhead.

"Forty-four years," responded Bowdrie as he sat in his cane-back rocker. "Reverend Crosse, Miss Emily, and me attended CCHS together, but that was back in the old wooden building."

"Then perhaps you can give me a local history lesson."

Bowdrie turned down the squelch on his two-way radio. In the distance church bells tolled. Flakes of snow as large as chicken feathers stuck to the basement windows. "Folks gonna need chains as much as salvation tonight."

"You sound more pragmatic than religious," said Shayne.

The sheriff shook his head. "Tell me, you really suspect the reverend of bombing your friend? Amos Crosse may have some strange ways, but he's a good man."

"What do you mean 'strange'?"

"Well, he's been known to wrestle the local teenagers for Christ. If he wins, they go to church for a month."

"And if he loses?"

"Don't know. It hasn't happened yet."

"To answer your question," said Shayne, "I did suspect your minister until on the way down from the church I remembered something."

"What?"

"The Reverend Crosse's a vegetarian, right?"

"Over ten years now."

"The man who left the shirt bag in his Miami room also left a lot of litter from Burger King and McDonald's."

"Meat. I'm impressed. You're a pretty good detective, I bet."

"Just observant, observant enough to notice that Emily Greer called the minister Amos and he referred to her as Emily." Shayne sipped the warm coffee. "What's the story?"

"Come on. The way they talk 'bout each other makes you think there is a story?"

"That and a woman doesn't normally give her minister a shirt, especially a black chamois."

"Something you don't understand, Shayne. Long before he was a reverend, Amos was a halfback, and Emily was his school sweetheart. Mr. and Miss CCHS. Like most kids 'round here, he went off to U.T."

"Tennessee."

"Yeah. Had a pretty good career, too. Then during his junior year he got banged up bad in the Kentucky game. Busted knee. That's when his life changed. Amos always said it took a broken knee to put him on his

knees."

"He got religion."

"And how. Finished school and went off to a seminary out West."

"What happened to him and Emily?"

"Funny thing. She'd followed him to Knoxville, but when he left for the seminary, she headed south."

"For Miami."

"That's right. How'd you know?"

"Just a guess. She mentioned that when she was young her father took her to the Old Crescent Hotel there on business trips."

The sheriff laughed under his breath. "Not hardly."

"What do you mean?"

"If she went with her father, she went with a ghost. Talbert Greer died when we were all in kindergarten. He and Mrs. Greer, Emily's mother, were killed in a car wreck down old Route 11 a piece."

Shayne cradled his cold hands around the cup. "But she knew the Crescent real well."

"She could have. She stayed down in that area for over a year after college."

"But she came back?"

"Bad marriage," she said. "Got off the bus one day with nothing but the clothes on her back and little Horace in her arms."

"So Horace is her child by that marriage."

"That's what she said."

The redhead leaned back and lit up a Camel. He had to shift gears a bit. Earlier when Emily Greer had mentioned going to the Crescent as a child, he had pictured the place as he knew it had been thirty or so years ago. But a decade later—after college—made all the difference. What had been in its heyday a plush, upper-class resort had lost favor with the elite and had degenerated over the years into a rather sleazy hot-sheet hole frequented by penny-ante hoods, down-on-their-luckers, and prostitutes. The city had been happy to see it plowed under for the condo project. "When Emily returned to Crosse City, didn't she have a nice inheritance waiting for her?"

"It had been in trust. For a woman without much experience in business, did she catch on. Took to running Old Man Greer's holdings like a duck to water."

Shayne dragged deeply on his cigarette. "Why does everybody call her *Miss* Emily?"

"Two reasons. One, it's a term of respect. She's been awfully good for Crosse City. I'd bet one out of every two people in town works for her in some way, and the other wishes he did. Second, well, since that

day she rode back into town on the Greyhound, she's never shown any interest in men. Hell, I even tried to get her to go out with me a couple of times, but no dice. So, like the rest of the guys around here, I just stopped trying. Between us chickens, sometimes she seems more a monument than a woman."

"Tell me about Horace," said Shayne.

"He's a wild one. Has been all his life. Never had no daddy to ride herd on him."

"That why his joke last night in the restaurant."

"Probably. Horace is all the time joking about not having to answer to no old man. But, between you and me, it hurts him. Has since he was in grade school and the yahoos kidded him about it. Went home every-day with a bloody nose from fighting."

"Maybe he needs to wrestle the reverend," said Shayne, standing up and refilling both mugs. "Did Miss Emily think the army would make a man of Horace?"

"You are observant. The field jacket he usually wears."

"Yeah."

"Well, even Uncle Sam had his trouble with our Horace. Boy ended up in the stockade somewhere in Deutchland. Then they shipped him home with one of them less-than-honorable discharges."

"Any idea what he did to get himself in such a mess?"

The sheriff almost choked on his coffee before coughing it out all over his shirt. "Holy shit! As I remember it, he was caught higher than a kite fragging the officer's H.Q."

"What?"

"Sonuva gun. Horace's specialty was demolitions."

XI

HAVING LED HIS WITNESS ALL THE WHILE, SHAYNE wasn't surprised at the revelation, but Sheriff Jessie Bowdrie reacted with shock. "You suspected Horace?" he said.

"After I found out who purchased the shirt, I eliminated Miss Emily quite easily. I suppose she could have worn an elaborate disguise in Miami, but it was doubtful she could locate C-4 there much less set it off. Besides, haven't you seen her around town since Christmas?"

"Most every day. Out at the high school."

Shayne dropped the ashes from his Camel. "When I saw you last night, you said something to Horace about his staying out of trouble for a week. Is that because you haven't seen him around for that long?"

"Sonuva gun, if that don't beat all." The sheriff unlocked his gun

cabinet and strapped on a .38. "Guess I know where to go next." He spun the cylinders, checking for cartridges in all chambers. "Can you answer one last question for a poor country sheriff?"

The redhead stood up. "Go ahead."

"Why do you think Horace went all the way down to Miami to set off that bomb?"

"Why don't we ask his mother," said the detective, pointing at the window. "Thats her BMW pulling up out there, isn't it?"

The woman who burst into the sheriff's office was a different person from the one Shayne had met at the high school earlier in the day. She was stooped over, her actions weren't deliberate, and her face seemed blanched even after being in the cold.

"Emily," said the sheriff, "what's wrong?"

She looked directly at the redhead. "Thank God, you're here, Mr. Shayne. It's Horace."

"What about him?" said the detective.

Sitting down, she tried to unbutton her silver fox jacket, but her fingers seemed to the redhead all thumbs.

"When we talked at the high school," she began, "I confess I was so busy defending Amos—Reverend Crosse—that I overlooked something that should have been obvious."

"Horace's army background," offered the sheriff.

"You know?" she said.

"We were just talking about it," said Shayne.

"I realize my son has problems," she continued, "but he's been seeing a V.A. doctor about the drugs and other things for over a year now. Anyway, I just can't imagine him really hurting someone purposefully." She looked at Jessie Bowdrie.

Something started to connect in the detective's head. "Miss Emily, you told me you purchased the shirt for the Reverend as a Christmas gift."

"Yes."

"Did you *personally* give the shirt to him?"

She closed her eyes. "Let's see . . . I wrapped it and signed the card . . . wait a minute . . . I had to go up to Knoxville to see my accountant, and I asked Horace to deliver it to the church before Amos left on his retreat. When I got back that night, the present was gone and so was Horace."

"Did Horace let you know where he was headed?" said the sheriff.

"Yes. I found a note that said he and some of the boys were going hunting."

Shayne realized the local rabbits hadn't been in much danger during

that hunting trip. "Now this all happened the day before Christmas?"

"Yes," she said.

"Did you two talk about anything that day, or did anything else happen about then?" said Shayne.

Again she closed her eyes in thought. "No, not that I recall. Well, wait a second. We did have supper a day or so earlier. I remember that because Horace and I are rarely home together any more."

"And?" said Shayne.

"We had several sherries, and we talked about some things that we hadn't talked about . . . ever. I think it started when Horace got real serious for a change and asked me why I'd never been interested in any of the local men, why I always avoided male relationships. Maybe it was the wine talking, maybe it was all the years of frustration, but . . . "

"Did you say anything about Miami?" said Shayne.

"Why yes, I did, but Horace wouldn't have . . . couldn't have . . . misunderstood."

"Misunderstood what?" pressed the detective.

She ran her fingers along the fox, trying hard to compose herself. "You mentioned that a friend of yours was hurt. You're a private investigator. Was your friend with the police, now or once?"

"Yes," admitted Shayne.

"Oh, My God! Tell me your friend's name wasn't Gentry."

Shayne looked into her glazed eyes. "I can't."

She started to shake. "All I said to Horace that night was that my life would have been different 'if it hadn't been for that Miami policeman, Will Gentry'."

Sheriff Bowdrie interrupted. "Am I hearing right? It sounds like Horace thought he was doing his mother a favor by blowing up this Will Gentry."

Without raising her eyes, Emily Greer said, "You've got to understand I have always loved Horace, and despite the rowdy, irresponsible troublemaker that Crosse City has always seen, Horace has always loved me."

"Do you really think that Horace could have mistaken what Emily said? Could he have convinced himself that he could show his love for his mother by destroying a man in her past?" said the sheriff.

"You'd have to ask his doctor about that," said Shayne. He turned to the woman who had once again drawn into herself. She looked like a scared animal. "I know this is difficult for you, Miss Emily . . . "

"Just Emily."

"Emily," said the redhead, remembering the decayed state of the

Crescent Hotel, "what exactly was your connection with Will Gentry?"

"You don't have to answer any of our questions, Emily," said Bowdrie.

"No, Jessie," she said, "I must answer this for my soul. Twenty years is long enough to carry this burden."

"What are you talking about?"

"That hot August night when Amos told me he was devoting himself to the ministry, I couldn't take it. For six years we had planned out a life together that seemed so real. Marriage. He'd manage my father's business. Life was going to be perfect. But when he left for California, it all fell apart. I tried to get as far away from him, from his place, from all the memories."

Shayne said, "So you left for Miami."

"Yes," she admitted.

"And a bad marriage," said the sheriff.

"There never was a bad marriage, or any marriage for that matter," she said haltingly. "When Amos turned our life down, me down, I felt there was something wrong with me. In Miami I gave myself to any man who'd have me, and when I needed money to survive, I turned to . . . "

"The Crescent Hotel," said the detective.

"Yes. Eventually a police officer arrested me for soliciting. From that moment I thought of myself as a . . . whore, unworthy of Amos, or any good man." She looked directly at the sheriff.

Jessie Bowdrie dropped his eyes.

"I know now," she persisted, "I guess I've always known. I shouldn't have blamed that policeman. I should have blamed myself."

The phone rang. And rang. Finally the sheriff picked it up. "Hello. Oh, Jim . . . what? . . . where? . . . O.K. I'll be right there, but don't say anything to anybody." He hung up.

Shayne said, "What's that about?"

"Horace Greer. Jim Ruler just spotted him lurking outside the high school. He was carrying a green knapsack, wearing camouflage clothes, and his face was covered with lampblack."

Emily Greer shrieked and fell to the floor.

XII

THE CLUMPS OF SNOW COLLIDED WITH THE BRONCO'S windshield as though shot from a cannon. With the onset of the winter storm and darkness, Shayne's feeling of foreboding grew. What had begun with the smallest of leads was building to a powerful climax. And the carnage in Miami might only be a prelude to a bigger disaster.

The sheriff had called in an off-duty deputy to take care of Emily Greer, who had fainted on hearing the news of her son's activity. Shayne would have liked to have stayed around to find out more about her past, but Horace loomed as more important.

When they slid into the high school's snow-covered parking lot, Shayne was amazed at what he saw. Despite nature's deluge, cars and trucks already blanketed in white filled the parking lot. A few figures battled the snow and stiff wind to enter the well-lighted building.

The two men jumped from the Bronco. Shayne could feel the snow's wetness through the leather soles of his loafers, and over the storm's howl he could make out the faint chords of an organ.

"Sounds like the fire and brimstone is about to begin," said Bowdrie.

Shayne almost wondered whether the sheriff was talking about inside or outside. "Where do we start?"

"Let's split up. I'll go to the back, and you take the front. If you see anything, let's try to handle it quietly. Last thing I want around here is a panic."

"Horace has already proven what he's capable of."

"Can you handle any trouble?" said the sheriff.

Shayne understood the question. "Yeah, I've got an S&W in my belt."

"Consider yourself a duly sworn-in deputy of Bell County."

A sheet of paper appeared in Shayne's freezing hand as he entered the warmth of the auditorium. Smiling faces and nodding heads stared at the dais. In the spotlight at the front and flanked by two large wooden crosses, Amos Crosse stood. His sweat-suit shed, he wore a dark, polyester suit that he filled as much as his baritone voice did the auditorium. "This year my retreat revealed to me one insight into man: that unacknowledged sin grows like a cancer, eating away the body and spirit till finally"—his eyes seemed to leap into the transfixed congregation—"it kills." "Amen, brother," came the chorus. Shayne's eyes swept the auditorium. Nothing. In the opposite wing Jessie Bowdrie craned his neck. They locked eyes and shook their heads. "And I say to you that you must confess your sins, for we are told that though they are as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow." Icy flakes buffeted the auditorium's upper windows as if trying to break into the sanctuary. "White as snow if you purge them from your soul." "Amen." "Amen." From the back of the dais appeared a dark figure. "Those who refuse are damned to a burning hell with Satan who comes to claim his own." Shayne blended into the shadows of the outer aisle. Horace Greer, clad in green, advanced slowly toward the unaware Reverend

Crosse. Gasps replaced "Amens" as the M-16 suddenly became visible. Jessie Bowdrie reached for his revolver. The minister pivoted to see Horace. The rear doors to the auditorium blew open. Emily Greer appeared in the midst of the wind-driven snow. "Horrrrr--accccce!" she screamed. "Noooooooo!" Some heads turned back—some remained fixated on the platform. Amplified by the battery of microphones, the Reverend's voice boomed, "Emily!" Horace lifted his weapon. "Don't!" said Emily Greer, struggled toward the dais. Her fox was gone and she shivered. "I'm doing this for you, Mother. For us." "Don't hurt him, Horace—don't kill your FATHER." Shayne stood beneath one cross and Bowdrie, the other. The sheriff's .38 came into the classic firing position, but Shayne waved him off. Horace froze. "My son?" said Crosse. "Our son," said the woman on reaching the platform. "Why didn't you . . . " "I was too ashamed, Amos." "But, Mother." "He didn't know who you were, Horace, till now. I shouldn't have told you anything this afternoon." Shayne knew now why she had fainted on hearing that Horace was at the auditorium. Horace's finger tightened around the trigger, and sweat dripped from his blackened forehead. "It's too late to save us," returned Horace, "but in another minute we'll be free of sin—all of us here tonight."

The cross beside Shayne's right hand toppled toward the two men. Horace brought the weapon up to shield himself. The huge wooden object struck the fatigue-clad figure, driving him headlong into the minister, sprawling them both to the floor.

By the time Shayne reached the middle of the dais, the Army rifle lay off to the side. The Reverend Crosse held Horace in a bear-hug as the two men struggled. "Easy, son," said the minister softly over the murmur of the crowd. "Everything's out in the open now—everything'll be O.K."

Emily Greer knelt beside the suddenly becalmed pair, and Shayne knew this was one wrestling match that Amos Crosse had won hands down.

WILL GENTRY SCATTERED THE ASH FROM HIS CIGAR IN the rubble that still remained from the recent explosion. "You did a helluva job putting all that together, Mike. That's some story."

"Yeah," said the redhead, "but there's one thing I still can't figure."

"What's that?"

"For the life of me I don't remember pushing over that cross." ●

There are two sharp metallic clicks. The attache case opens and out comes a pistol with its barrel elongated by a silencer. The pistol is aimed directly at me!

Moonlight Golf, Midnight Murder

by JERRY JACOBSON

I DRIVE DOWN OLD RUSTIN ROAD JUST LIKE ALL THE times before, without a dreadful bone in my body. It's a black-hole night, but the moon is the fullest I've seen it and that makes it create stark, full shadows. I try to miss all the potholes in Old Rustin to make less racket, but I hit maybe half of them and they rattle the old Buick right down to its motor mounts. But no dread. No terror. All I feel is opportunity, possibility and the seizing of the grand moment.

I'm dressed for cat burglary. I wear black trousers and socks, black Iron Maiden tee-shirt, black lightweight nylon jacket, black seaman's watchcap. I may be going for diamonds, but I'm not; I'm going for pars and birdies. I may be clouting an intruding victim, but I'm not; I'm swinging from the heels and for distance.

The moon's light ticks through giant maples all along Old Rustin, stalking me like a cop. Old Rustin is one long crossbar on a capital T, with residential streets running into it from the right. Bayard, Mulrooney, Priestly, Division. The last is the one I keep my eye peeled for. Opposite it, across Old Rustin, is the padlocked maintenance gate

that leads to a midway point down the fairway of No. 5.

On the right are only the backyards of homes whose backs are turned on Old Rustin. Few people are awake in them. It's after midnight on a Tuesday in a blue collar neighborhood shunned by its next-door neighbor, the very posh and private Briarwood Golf and Country Club. You figure it out. Wealth and privilege just a road's width away.

Briarwood, the community for which the golf course is named, is a private and restricted enclave on the opposite side of the course. It's the city's old money, with a gatehouse and twenty-four hour guard-duty and a roving security patrol. Most of the homes inside have electrified fences and elaborate alarm systems and dogs who are trained to be able to tell if you belong or if you're their dinner. But then, the people living inside Briarwood have quite a lot to lose.

And while, to a resident, their opinion will differ from mine, I may as well go on record right now: I believe we were placed upon this earth to do one thing alone. To play golf.

That may seem to you a narrow and selfish philosophy. But let me point out that I'm just a fresh kid who only recently escaped college by the skin of his grade-point-average. I've come to learn that what I learned in college has almost no application in life. I'm thinking of a law suit for punitive damages against my college's registrar for taking my tuition money under false pretenses.

Of course, my college didn't *sign* anything that promised it would teach me things that would be useful in the outside world. That was smart thinking on their part. Maybe they want me to carry that grudge around on my back the rest of my life like a sack of stones. Maybe they want me to come around to their way of thinking: that college is only a tool some people pick up by the wrong end and toss into the works while others grasp by the right end and use to fine-tune their futures.

Maybe I'll just write a mean-spirited letter to the dean, and let it go at that.

MY CLUBS ARE IN THE BACK SEAT OF THE BUICK: A TWO-iron for my driver and fairway wood, a seven-iron for pitching and a straight blade putter for the greens. Midnight golfers should travel light. There are times when you have to play on the run.

I jam three bright orange golf balls into a jacket pocket and zip the pocket closed. These are quality golf balls, eight bucks a sleeve at any pro shop or sporting goods store. I don't put out a dime for them. I do all my golf ball shopping off the bottom of course lakes and ponds, throw away the ones cut with smiling faces and keep all the rest.

I leave the Buick on the road shoulder and unlocked. If my round is

interrupted by dogs or guards, I don't want to be fumbling for a key in the middle of my getaway. Besides, the lock on that side is temperamental anyway. And people steal Buicks that are classics, not Buicks that are relics.

I cross Old Rustin, leap the concrete drainage ditch, and cower down behind the thick trunk of one of the maples. I pull back the left sleeve of the nylon jacket and check the time. It's 12:29 a.m. I calm my breathing and cower down some more and listen for the sound of the golf cart putting down the fairway of No. 5.

And then I hear the thin electric hum as the cart breaks over the crest of the knoll of No. 5, a long up-and-down par-five. I don't stand to verify with my eyes what my ears have heard. If I can see him, then he can spot me, or at least my shadowy form, looking nothing like another maple trunk. A good, safe round of moonlight golf can turn on such slender precautions as these.

He comes straight down the middle of the fairway, like a stiffly hit Nicklaus drive. His name is Duffy and he's one of three course security guards, one for each eight hours of the day. Duffy has the gravy shift, the graveyard shift. Ten p.m. to six a.m. Of the three he's the oldest and pushing sixty. Like a factory's night watchman, the last shift goes to the oldest, when nothing is supposed to happen but the coming up of dawn.

Duffy drinks on the job. Once as he motored down the fairway of No. 5, I heard a clank come from the electric cart. After Duffy had disappeared to tour No. 6, I went out to the spot where I'd heard the clanking sound and found a half-empty bottle of Irish whisky asleep on the grass. I considered the odds on Duffy's discovering his pint among the missing. That night I didn't play.

TONIGHT, DUFFY MOTORS PAST AND THERE IS NO CLANK. He sits his steed badly stoop-shouldered, like a knight errant who has engaged the enemy once too often. Unless he can hook on with some private security company, this looks to be his last job. Occasionally he glances left and right into the out-of-bounds areas, but I can tell it's just a nasty habit he's trying to kick. Mostly, Duffy just dozes and putts and ticks off the holes until he gets to No. 18 and can recharge the cart and get back to his teevee in the security office in the clubhouse and the Tonight Show. And the Irish whisky.

Another minute and the fairway is again quiet. There is no wind and that's good news for nocturnal tee-men. When the wind comes up here, it swirls and is taken in every direction, down all the fairways and eventually across the breadth of the golf course to the clubhouse and

the caretaker's home behind it. Where is housed the Doberman kennels. Dobermans have an extremely keen sense of smell and the caretaker has an extremely keen sense of what riles Dobermans. The city has four private golf clubs and all of them have dogs and astute caretakers. I guess you know that I tend to favor the public courses.

I come out of hiding. I withdraw my lockpicks from the breast pocket of my jacket. The padlock is easy, as big as a Russian medal. I enter through the gate, close it behind me and reposition the lock without snapping it shut. A grand illusion, more of which you shall learn later.

Dew is starting to form on the grass. Tiny diamonds of moisture cling to the tip of every blade. It's lovely. I'll be playing upon a sea of diamonds.

I take a drop just about where I checked for Duffy's whisky bottle. If I'd teed off, a fairway wood would have had me at least eighty yards deeper down the fairway, but I claim this as my second shot on the par-four. I'll have to hit a helluva two-iron to reach an unelevated green planted dead ahead, but I've always felt God was watching golfers who cheated, and eventually paid them back on a subsequent hole. That hovering blade in mind, I've never cheated at golf.

I hit it fat and true, but I can tell from its flight it will come up about a dime short of the green. But my round is underway and in the darkness and the silence all my senses are heightened.

I mentioned before about a grand illusion. Let me explain.

I AM FULLY AWARE LIFE ISN'T ONE LONG DEEP-PAN PIZZA and a frosty Lowenbrau and smacking golf balls into the Great Deep Dark.

I do have a job. I am the co-owner of a 155-seat movie theater in the college district of town called The Grand Illusion. It's located on a short sidehill in space formerly occupied by a campus head shop and waterbed emporium. My partner is Beano Davis, my former college roommate. We run art films, Swedish classics, German new-wave, Bogart, and those French bedroom farces of the 50's and 60's. Doris Day and Rock Hudson with subtitles. The college kids seem to like the mix. Every Friday at midnight we pull the seats for festival seating and run *Rocky Horror Picture Show* for the campus fringies with the green hair and fractured personalities. We pack them in and break the fire codes wide open and everybody has a freaky old time.

But life demands its diversions. I play golf under the moon. Beano is a rock-climber and mountaineer whose latest goal is to scale the outside walls of all sixty-seven buildings on campus. No picks and no pitons. If

he's ever caught at it, he doesn't want to be cited for property damage, just for temporary insanity.

Beano and I still get along fine as roomies. We almost never see each other, we don't date each other's women out of spite or for sport, and if one of us should buy the other out in the show business, the seller gets a lifetime pass, free popcorn forever and all the butter we want to coat our arterial walls.

I find my third shot sixty yards short of a green whose pin is cut in the deep right-hand corner. I lift the ball off the dewy grass with the seven-iron like pure surgery, follow it up and find it four feet from the hole. I drop it for a bogey-five.

The applause is deafening.

The sixth is an elevated par-three. A little like hitting a stone down into the Grand Canyon. I jam the tee low into the tee-off mat to get a bit more distance out of the seven-iron. The green is below me, moonlit and starkly white. It's almost like I've got the best seat in a theater balcony and I'm watching a stage play about golf.

It's a good shot. I can see the arc of the orange ball all the way down. It bounces on the front edge of the green, rebounds twice and rolls to a stop about six feet from the flag. I'm going to be back to even-par.

I take a steep path down to sea-level and as I go, I wonder how the coupon-clippers are sleeping tonight on the other side of the course. Do the rich rest easily, or do they toss and turn all night and hear imaginary sounds coming from the direction of the counting house? Not much was ever really heard or known about the wealthy of this city. Their low-profile wealth was scattered around in small residential enclaves like Briarwood where you didn't sport your megabucks on your sleeve. I suppose the rich of Briarwood slept as soundly or as restlessly as their consciences would bear, a little bit like privileged prisoners behind their gatehouses and electrified fences, surrounded by their wealth and the things others did not have.

I par No. 6, but bogey Nos. 7 and 8. The darkness creates its own illusions of depth and distance. Owls and birds fidget in the thick smashes of trees over my intrusion into their night world. Crickets leap from my path to escape from being trampled. The night has a thousand eyes.

This course is a constant series of rises and falls, not at all like the monotonous public courses in the city, those no-frills bits of landscape built on landfills and as level as airfields. Briarwood is sculpted on planes and angles so the rich will not be visually bored. F. Scott Fitzgerald felt the rich were different from the rest of humanity. It was Hemingway's opinion they were different because they had more

money. I think they're different because they have better golf courses.

The fairway of No. 9 slopes downward. Firs hug it claustrophobically on both sides. It cuts a sharp lefthand dogleg where it bellies out. The fir trees are too monstrous to shortcut, so your second shot must be played to the opening to go after the rest of the par-five hole from there.

TWO SHOTS LATER, I'M STRIDING DOWN NO. 9'S FAIRWAY, listening to the loons go crazy with their primal screaming, a thing psychiatrists picked up on later as fashionable therapy allowing them to make one more trip to the bank.

I am due for a bad shot. Overdue. I am playing too well, far above my head.

And it comes, a bad slicer. The ball flies away in a high, ugly left-to-right arc. All I can do is watch as it grows worse with each foot it travels through space.

The green is set up on a kidney-shaped plateau. It is surrounded by seven sand traps, far more than enough to protect it from assaults on par. Sometimes, golf isn't at all a fair game.

My ball finds the largest of the seven, a deep trap below the green. When I blast out, I won't be able to see the hole or the green or much of anything, except the black sky and the tops of the trees.

This final hole of the front nine is actually adjacent to the clubhouse hole, No. 18. The two holes are separated by a wide greenbelt of fir trees, a miniature forest so thick and pervasive the clubhouse, the kennels and the caretaker's quarters might as well be on another planet. The two holes are situated this way for the dandified golfers who play only the first nine holes and then finish out their round in the clubhouse lounge lifting whisky sours instead of wedges and fairway woods. A narrow path is cut through the firs, a concrete walkway with handrails. The way of the rich is always paved. For people like you and me, even the way into heaven will have potholes. And when and if the way gets paved, God will probably tax us up the nose.

I find my ball half-buried in sand. The seven-iron has too much loft to do any good, so I drop it and my putter on the green's apron and take the two-iron down into the Gobi Desert. It's a hideous lie; I'll be here all night with it.

I am digging in for a firm foothold when a sound foreign to the night makes me freeze dead still. I stop my breathing and listen more closely. Now I know what I hear. I hear footsteps. Footsteps coming along the concrete walkway through the trees.

THE OPENING TO THE PATH IS SOME FIFTY YARDS AWAY, beyond the green and an area of grassy rough. I can make out two figures coming towards me, walking abreast. Two men.

I drop the two-iron and follow right after it. I am flat on my chest against the steeped wall of sand. I'm not all that certain I wasn't seen. But then, I'm not that certain I was, either.

For a moment I think it's Duffy and the caretaker, abroad on some mission or routine duty. But the gait of these men is strong and steady, the stride of younger men.

Next I hear low voices, their volume growing as they near the far side of the green. My golf clubs! The putter and seven-iron will be in plain view if the men come up and onto the green. If they spot the clubs, they're not going to chalk it up to a quick, late-night round by Casper the Ghost.

But they're not coming up to the green. They seem to have stopped near the gulf of rough between the green and the entrance to the path. They are close enough to me now so that I am able to make out their words. True, they are faceless; but their voices are distinctly different. I number them in my mind like golf holes. Voice No. 1 is soft and refined, but with a certain unspoken deadliness in it. Voice No. 2 is also well-educated and restrained, but in it I read an element of fear and anxiety and more youthfulness than Voice No. 1. Were I to catagorize them as dominant or submissive personalities, the former would be the dominant force and the latter the moveable object.

"It was impressed upon you never to come to the house," I hear Voice No. 1 speak. "Now, they have your name on record at the gatehouse as a *midnight* visitor, which is even *more* memorable."

"I used a phony name, I told you that," says Voice No. 2. "And I gave the gatemaster the number of a house on Penwick Road as my destination, not yours."

"Your automobile's license plate number was also recorded by the gatemaster as you drove through," says Voice No. 1, the menace in his tone still there. "I suppose that was phony, too? Made out of gingerbread and frosted icing?"

"So, I'm a late night guest who can be identified through his auto license," says Voice No. 2 in response. "That's not a criminal act and can't even be *connected* with any criminal act."

"You've come here to tell me you've killed Bunny," says No. 1. "Contradict me if I'm wrong, but isn't *that* a criminal act?"

"Sure, if I'm *connected*. But that won't happen. I met her at a coffee shop in town. She told me she wanted to blow the whistle on you. One of her girlfriends was mixing and matching and ended up in the E.R. at

Bedford General looking like some ragdoll some kid had tossed into the room. So, if Bunny is going to blow the whistle on you, what do I do? Hook her whistle up to a public address system so the whole world can hear?"

"Go on," I hear Voice No. 1 say, his menace held a little in abeyance now, a hovering blade.

"We went walking," Voice No. 2 goes on. "She told me there were a lot of things she wanted to get out of her system. She told me she was going to yank the rug on you, me, the candy store, everything."

"I see."

"We were walking across the Prefontaine Street Bridge, the one that crosses over the interstate freeway. She was calm as a cucumber. She seemed perfectly satisfied to spend ten years in prison and to drag us right along with her."

"Across the freeway bridge, you say."

"I pushed her over," I hear Voice No. 2 continue, with a touch of remorse in his tone. "I pushed her hard enough so that she hit the railing and tumbled over it. Her body was hit by three automobiles and then dragged by a fourth."

"Were you seen, fellow?"

"When I pushed her over, there were no cars on the bridge coming from either direction and none on the approaches. After she was gone, I simply turned and began walking back into town. A few cars passed me then . . . but, by *then* I was just someone walking alone across the Prefontaine Street Bridge."

"Good. The police will likely judge it a suicide. Freeway overpasses are the Golden Gate Bridge of the 80's. If they don't die from the fall, they're killed by traffic."

"She had to be cut off from the network," says Voice No. 2, with little of his remorse remaining now.

"Fellow," says Voice No. 1, his tone suddenly growing darker, "you don't know the half."

There is a sort of strained silence then. Maybe more like a pregnant pause. Sand is clogging my nostrils and creeping down into my trousers and running into my ears, so I have more with which to contend than reading pauses and intents and emotions.

But there are no more words. Just two sounds, identical, and spaced about two seconds apart.

Pfft. Pfft.

The sounds are barely discernible, like two blasts of wind ruffling a curtain.

Then there is a third sound, a thudding. An impacting.

IF YOU THINK I'M GOING TO RISE TO CONFIRM WITH MY eyes all of what my ears have just heard, then your hay truck is a few bales short of a full load. I stay put. Above me the moon is radiant and starkly white, almost luring me to stand and become an eye witness. But I don't.

Very soon I hear the same clacking of footsteps on the concrete path. But this time not two sets. This time just one. They recede at a swifter pace than when they arrived. My presence has gone unnoticed and my golf clubs haven't been spotted.

The night is once again quiet. I come up out of the sand trap timidly, poking my head and eyes out at green-level. The path towards the clubhouse is vacant.

I climb up onto the green and cross it to the depression of rough where the two men had been talking.

I can now put an identity to the pfft-pfft sounds.

The man is lying on his back, his hands and arms are flung out from his sides from the velocity and impact of the bullets slamming into his chest. He wears expensive, hand-tooled leather loafers whose soles are nearly new. The trenchcoat is nearly new as well; a Joseph A. Banks that's at least a $200 number. The two bulletholes in it are placed directly over his heart. Both are ringed by uneven circles of wetness, which continue to grow and spread even as I watch.

Voice No. 2. The voice that was compliant, apologetic and the one at risk.

His wallet is in his left breast pocket. A very yippy-skippy silk suit. Three-hundred beans for it if he forked over a nickel. Typical wallet of the 80's: thin as a flatfish and more room for credit cards than for cash.

It's been skinned clean, empty. Pistol has kept his wits about him and seen to the branch-wiping of *that* trail.

Near the body, in the direction of the footpath, a flash of white catches my eye. Pistol has slipped up. He's dropped something that looks to have been collected from the dead man's wallet. A business card, expensively embossed, the kind you can't resist running your fingers across after you read. *Evergreen Institute.* That's it. No address, no telephone numbers, no names.

I know the company. Motivational training. They provide people with spanking new self images. They raise the ceiling on the unknown human potential and point the golden way towards greater achievement and success. Heady stuff. Could have used a few hits of that myself in college.

And Evergreen's track record is no fluke. Professional athletes, surgeons, business managers and execs. Experts agree Evergreen is

more than just a pep squad for the ego. Training, seminars, exhaustive testing. *Fortune Magazine* doesn't tell lies.

I take the card and zip it into a pocket of my jacket. I see my next responsibility as heading for the course's security office to tell Duffy he's got a corpse on his golf course. But then, they'll just lay the killing on me.

No, it's in my best interest to disassociate myself from all that's happened here tonight—the moonlight golf, the midnight murder, everything. Oops. That seems to me to be very nearly the commission of another crime. Of *two* crimes. I also have knowledge that someone named Bunny did not jump from the Prefontaine Street Bridge, but was pushed from it. Will my disassociation with these crimes later become judged the aiding and abetting of them? There is a good chance of that happening.

But not if I can prevent myself from being flushed from the woodwork as a principal witness. Principal, hell. *Sole* witness.

I COLLECT MY GOLF CLUBS. MAYBE I SHOULD RETRACE my steps and wipe my fingerprints from all the flag sticks on the holes I've played. Naw. My fearful imagination is taking flight. No police detective is going to come flying off the wall like that unless he's Columbo; and *he's* fantastic history.

I reverse my route nonetheless. All the way back to No. 5 I stay in the thick shadows along the fairways, as I constantly remind myself to push through the maintenance gate and refix its padlock with my left hand on which I am still wearing my golf glove. Also, I wonder if anyone in the houses along Old Rustin Road has noted the suspicious presence of an old Buick parked on the road shoulder, one that doesn't belong there. I decide I'll have to trust in luck on that count.

I drive off back up Old Rustin. No one is running at me with knives and guns and there are no headlights in my rear view mirror. It may be false security or false hope, but I am half-convinced no one on the face of the earth knows I've even been here tonight.

Not until I see the lights of the campus district do I feel relaxation in my bones and my mind. I think about what I've just left. Briarwood, your woods are thick with killers and candymen. Sleep well.

THESE DAYS IT SEEMS TO BE *DE RIGUEUR* TO WORK IN THE city and live in the suburbs, thereby becoming a wage thief and a tax drain by twice biting the hand that feeds you. Beano and I could never be that deceitful. We live about four blocks from the Grand Illusion Theater, in an old Victorian that is only a stubbie's throw from Greek

Row and the campus. We rent basement rooms to two students we hardly ever see, keep the Greeks at a distance with a lot of prohibitive signs and try to disregard that living in this old house is a lot like living inside a a drafty elephant.

I dump my clubs in the umbrella stand in the foyer. Beano is in the living room and hears the racket. "Home is the hunter, eh? You get any squabs or ptarmigans?"

"They're birdies and eagles," I shout back as I peel out of some of my cat burglar clothing.

"Well, I got the species right, anyway."

Beano Davis was tagged with his nickname in high school. He's six-five and weighs something just a bit more than a damp dishrag. A string bean, right. He was the final player cut from the college varsity basketball team when he was a sophomore and went on to become the school's finest gym-rat player in its history. He still plays in pick-up games two nights a week at the intramural gym on the campus, eating the punk kids alive as a living legend ought to do.

He's sprawled out on the couch and looking into the fire dying out in the fireplace, a thing massive enough to cook a meal for an entire tribe of Teutons.

"Naigo just left," he informs me. "We scooped up a few dozen crawfish out of the ship canal and killed a half-rack of Red Hook Ale. And then we got good and satisfied together. She leaves you her best regards."

Naigo Phillips is Beano's girlfriend. She runs a used clothing store on the university district's main drag called The Daily Planet Antiquities. When she set up shop five years ago, a lot of her friends and relatives sent her sympathy cards. Then, funky clothing came into fashion: Victorian and Edwardian stuff, thin neckties from the 40's and 50's, bowling shirts, beaded dresses and tux jackets. Now, Naigo has three stores, thirty employees and a bank account in the high five-figures. She sent back all the sympathy cards, along with her own gold-embossed business cards.

"My best to her, as well," I answer back as I fall into an overstuffed leather chair opposite him, feeling the stuffing rearrange itself around me as it has done for years.

BY THIS TIME I AM USUALLY TALKING A BLUE STREAK about my moonlight round and the hazards and dangers I've confronted and defeated. My silence immediately tells him something very different happened tonight.

"You turn golf into a contact sport like Gerald Ford and conk

somebody?"

"Beano, you're not even close. In the short span of five golf holes and maybe forty minutes, I was a witness to one killing and to the confession of a second. The man who confessed to the first killing was the victim in the second."

"That's a very busy round of golf, Jonathan," says my roomie, ever the droll don, the castle's corridor wit. Beano isn't easily trapped in tomfoolery or practical jokes. He allows every string to be played out before he leaps at the unwary and has them strung up on the scaffold to dry. "Two corpses, do you say?"

"The deceased on the golf course was shot twice with a silenced pistol. Young guy, very dapper. Top of the line trenchcoat, $90 hand-tooled loafers. His business cards say he works for the Evergreen Institute."

"Worked," corrects Beano. "He's history. No name on the card?"

"Not that personalized," I tell Beano. "It's one of those where you write in your name and number, if you've got a hot potential client on the hook. I'd say he was in commission sales and not an officer of the institute. If he doesn't pan out, the boss simply takes back his business cards and passes them on to the next candidate." I take the card from my wallet and hand it to Beano.

"You're absolutely serious about this murder business, aren't you?"

"The man shot at the golf course killed someone named Bunny earlier in the evening. Pushed him—or her—over the railing of the Prefontaine Street Bridge."

"Oh-oh. Isn't that a freeway overpass? Bunny didn't enjoy a simple death."

I get up and check the big plastic cooler set in front of the sofa on the floor. Beano always brings it out filled with ice and refreshments when he has guests. The kitchen is easily two miles away. One last Red Hook is swimming in five inches of icy water. I fish it out and pop its top.

"So, have you called the police yet to inform them of all the dead bodies you've come across tonight?" I hear Beano ask from across the room.

"Why me?" I tell him. "The one on the freeway has probably already been found. And Duffy, the course's roving security guard, will find the other when he makes his rounds of the course at three a.m."

"So you're washing your hands," Beano taunts.

"They were never dirty," I tell him.

"But you're an eye-witness to a murder."

"I am an *ear*-witness. I was flat on my face in a sand trap. I didn't see a bloody thing."

"Did you hear any names spoken?" Beano says.

"Bunny. And the killer on the golf course kept referring to his victim as 'fellow.' Fellow-this, fellow-that."

"Oh-oh." Beano will use that phrase quite often. It's the way he verbally signals warnings. You know. Thin ice. Watch out for rolling rock. This section designated no smoking. "Watch out for this guy. He's cold and impersonal. Calling someone 'fellow' is like calling them buddy, sport, or pal. They're purposely creating distance by being impersonal. People like that should never be lent car keys. Or money. Or even the time of day. Big, bad dude, this one."

"I should have checked the dead guy's wallet more thoroughly," I confess to Beano. "A driver's license would have at least provided his name. Even a credit card."

"You were trespassing, Jonathan. Like me, when I scale the Undergraduate Library. You had to get the hell out of there."

"I suppose you're right."

"I *am* right. We're two of a kind, Jonathan. We're graduate misfits. We don't use our majors gainfully or productively, we aren't ripping around like maniacs after masters or doctorates. The whole world considers us to be on the run from responsibility. I climb buildings, you play golf at midnight. All our lives, people will be telling us to get the hell out of somewhere."

BUT I CAN TELL FROM THE WAY THOSE IMPISH, GRAY EYES are flickering that Beano doesn't want us to get the hell *out,* he wants us to get the hell *in.* Into a murder case. Just for the hell of it.

Because we're not supposed to be there.

"The cops won't connect the two deaths," he says to me now. "No way in hell. Cops go one-two-three. Their minds aren't equipped or trained to go from one to three and then back to two. Or to connect one to three, when two is standing in the way. Logic kills them. They can't think with any imagination."

"And we *can?"* I say.

"Duck soup, Jonathan. Haven't we avoided repaying our student loans for the past three years? Don't we audit every class on campus without paying fees? Can we not open a dozen of those coin-op windows in the Student Union cafeteria without offering coin? Haven't we made a go of a crackerbox little theater when everybody told us the two chains down the block would have us for breakfast? If that isn't imagination, Jonathan, then the genuine article is a phony."

"Yes, we've done all those things."

"Then we can catch murderers. One-two-three. One is Bunny and Three is Business Card. And in the middle is Two, Pistol. The police already have Bunny and they'll have Business Card before morning. But they'll never be able to factor Pistol into their equation because police thinking goes one-two-three."

"All we have to do is catch Pistol," I sum up. "So how do we do that?"

"By playing the hand we're dealt, by never overplaying our cards, by running a strategic bluff at an opportune moment and finally, by hitting them with the Case Ace."

It is Beano who's chosen the card-shark metaphor and he's cleaned out more than one dorm penny-ante game in his time, so I don't ruin his motif. "So what do we have for openers?"

HE LETS HIS BEN FRANKLIN GRANNY GLASSES RUN DOWN the bridge of his nose. His eyes grow milky as he gets pensive and cerebral. It's no act. Beano was in the running for a Rhodes once and it went down to the last inning before someone else got tapped. I still see him in my mind's eye sometimes, a very misfit Oxfordian, taking part in the Chancellor's procession down High Street, tripping over his robes and still in his blue Nikes from the night before. He would have been honored and beloved, of that I am sure.

"For openers," he says, "let us think back in time very carefully. Are there any verbal clues for us to go on?"

"A few," I tell him.

"Good. Hold those thoughts."

He bolts for the kitchen, tossing over his bony, Ichabod Crane shoulder as he goes, "We need more brewskis. Intellectual hardball is impossible to twirl without brewskis."

In a flash he's back, cradling an armload of Red Hooks. He dumps all but two of them into the cooler, pops them and serves us.

"Okay," he says, diving back to the couch. "Play ball."

"Bunny, Business Card and Pistol."

"That's the line-up on our scorecard," Beano says.

"Okay. All three of them are involved in some sort of network. Business Card pitched Bunny off the Prefontaine Street Bridge because Bunny was going to, and this is a direct quote 'yank the rug on you, me and the candy store'."

"Says Business Card to Pistol out on the golf course."

"Correct," I say. "Also, Business Card drove into Briarwood against Pistol's previous instructions. Pistol was plenty steamed over that. While Business Card gave the guard at the gatehouse a phony

name and false destination, his auto's license number was logged, dated and timed."

"Marking him as a very peculiar midnight visitor," concludes Beano, who is already reaching for another Red Hook in the cooler. "What else?"

"Business Card parked his car in Briarwood on Penwick Road. I get the impression that isn't very far from Pistol's home."

"Business Card must have doubled back to Pistol's house on foot," Beano surmises. "But Pistol wants a little more isolation and privacy, so he takes Business Card to the golf course. It would be helpful if I knew the layout of things out there a little better."

"The entrances to Briarwood and to the golf course are along the southern perimeter. Separate entrances, because not all the club's members are residents of Briarwood. Heavy, double electrified fencing runs up the easterly edge of Briarwood and along the westerly edge of the golf course. To the north is Klickitat Ravine, which geographically takes care of intruders there."

"Then the eastern edge of the course and the community of Briarwood itself have no restrictive barriers."

"Some of the backyards become portions of fairway and pine tree rough," I tell Beano. "The clubhouse, the gardens, the restaurant and lounge and the tennis courts—they're all accessible by footpaths and walkways from Briarwood. After all, it's the outsiders they want to restrict, not the insiders."

"Then we can also assume that Pistol's home is very near the golf course at some point. He's not going to be out walking blocks and blocks of Briarwood's streets after midnight, passing directly under the noses of dozens of his neighbors and in the company of a man he intends to kill."

"I'm beginning to get the message that Pistol lives alone," I tell Beano.

"Oh-oh. We can't assume that. That may have been why he wanted to get Business Card out of the house. Because he *doesn't* live alone and wanted to meet him at the door and escort him the hell out of there before any third party became a witness to their meeting."

"Or," I say to Beano, to offer an alternative line of thought, "he *does* live alone and merely wants Business Card's body found as far from his house as possible."

"Yes, Jonathan, at this point, as the odds-makers say, it's pick 'em."

WE SEEM TO HAVE DONE ALL THE IMAGINATIVE THINKING

we can on this matter. Beano starts work on another Red Hook. Next to him on the couch is a set of draftsman's blueprints of the buildings on the grounds of Bellvideare College downstate. His notations are as meticulous as those made by any team leader planning an assault on Everest.

"Poor waterproofing on some of these old buildings," I hear him say to no one in particular. "Lots of sandstone erosion. A great deal of this masonry is going to come off in my fingers if I'm not careful and don't design my routes away from all this faulty roofing and decaying waterproofing . . ."

It's almost two a.m. In another hour, Duffy will find the body out on the golf course and either go through another pint of Irish whisky for courage or give it up altogether.

"Think I'll put off Bellvideare for a year or two, until the state legislature votes more money or floats some more bonds for building repair and maintenance. I like challenges, but I don't have death wish . . ."

He goes for yet another Red Hook. I wonder just where in hell all those calories in him go. Sometimes I think there is a small anatomical furnace room in him, down a corridor, just off his stomach. A calorie-burner, going full blast twenty-four hours a day.

"I've heard of this Evergreen Institute," he says to me now. "Motivational training. But no fly-by-night, Strive To Be Wonderful con-men, who charge you a thousand beans for a pile of manuals and an $800 gold-leaf attache case. No, these guys get results. Pro ballplayers, upper-level business managers, the young yuppies bound for greatness. They got offices in the new Columbia Tower. Steel, glass and marble. The masonry of the 80's. A helluva climb. Spiderman and the Human Fly couldn't get better than even money for an ascent like that . . ."

"So, what's our next play with Pistol?" I say to him, though his interest in it all seems to be flagging just a little.

But Beano's indifference is like cinema, pure illusion. He's only put our duck soup on a back burner.

"Our next play," he tells me, "comes after we see what manner of cards all the other players are holding. We wait and see what washes up upon the beaches of the morning paper . . ."

I AM UP AT TEN A.M. BEANO IS ALREADY OUT OF HIS STARTING blocks and gone. It is his job to see the theater is cleaned, stocked, unlocked and warmed for the one o'clock matinee.

Our renter students are gone, too. Like always there's just me and

our beat-up, junkyard alley cat, One Reel, pawing and whining at the back door to be let in for chow.

The morning paper is spread out on the kitchen table. Two brief articles on the front page are circled in red ink from a felt tip pen, along with a curved arrow suggesting more dark news on an inside page. Beano has written across the top of the first page—*"Your body-count is off by one, roomie!"*

There is a second note from him next to the paper. It informs me he has business to do at the County Administration Building and at The North Face Mountaineers Shop on South Campus Parkway. He does not go on to explain, but then explaining his actions is not one of Beano's strongest card suits.

After I get some coffee humming and serve One Reel his morning victuals, I sit down to read what's inside the red circles. Both are brief, one-column stories under terse headlines:

BRIARWOOD GUARD FOUND SLAIN

A gate guard at exclusive Briarwood was found slain this morning by a resident returning home after a business trip. Police indicate Joshua Biggs, 58, was shot three times at close range in the gatehouse located at the entrance to the compound of expensive homes.

No motive for the killing was immediately present, a police spokesperson said. The investigation is continuing.

The second article is even briefer, almost obscured in the lower righthand corner by the weather box and Joke of the Morning:

MALE FOUND DEAD ON GOLF COURSE

An unidentified male was found dead this morning at the Briarwood Golf and Country Club, a private golf course in the north district of the city. The body was discovered by Eugene Duffy, 58, a night security guard at the club. Duffy found the body at around three a.m., during his tour of the golf course on motorized patrol, said a police spokesperson.

The dead man was well-dressed and in his late twenties. Police are investigating.

Not much. But the newspaper's morning edition hits the streets and porches at five a.m., so they go with what they have. It's clear Pistol has also murdered the gatehouse guard and removed his log sheets to further estrange himself from Bunny and Business Card. I wonder if he's gone as far as to drive Business Card's car out of Briarwood and then double back on foot to kill the guard at the gatehouse. Whoever Pistol is, I decide, he has his wits about him and doesn't have any second thoughts about smudging his own hands to save his own skin.

As for the third article, Beano's little red arrows lead me from page to page to the final red circle around the last barebones story on Page A-13:

> WOMAN KILLED IN JUMP
> FROM FREEWAY BRIDGE
>
> An unidentified female jumped from the Prefontaine Street Bridge and into freeway traffic late last night and was struck by automobiles in two lanes of southbound traffic. The woman was rushed to Sisters of Mercy Hospital where she was pronounced dead upon arrival at 10:48 p.m.

It is no wonder these articles are skimpy. Lots of next-of-kin for the police to track down and notify. And the early newspaper deadline didn't help, either. And now a Number Four is factored into an equation that is growing longer across the blackboard with each passing moment.

EVERY DAY OF OUR LIVES WE SEE GOOD PEOPLE DOING honorable acts. A harried, frazzled secretary or shopgirl stops off from work in the rain and buys flowers for a sick relative or friend. An elderly, widowed woman gives a portion of her monthly social security check to a local children's home in cash and remains an anonymous donor until the day she dies. A battery of mothers spend weeks laboriously sewing emblems and letters on tee-shirts because their sons' baseball team cannot afford uniforms.

And now, out of the rotted woodwork comes a network of people without consciences, the very personification of absolute greed and evil. Rotted apples up from the bottom of the barrel.

The world can sure get you blue sometimes.

By now, Pistol must think he is home free. He has eliminated the dangerous elements of the network and ridded himself of all evidence and witnesses.

Except for *moi*. The little golfer who wasn't there.

Like seeing the nose on your face in a mirror, it's evident to me that Bunny, Business Card and Pistol all have professional connections with Evergreen Institute and all its bright, young motivational *Wunderkinds*. Maybe it all has something to do with the kind of service they sell. Motivation. There are all kinds of ways to motivate. A swift kick in the drawers is motivational. So is the theory of reward and punishment. So is fear. And encouragement. This line of thinking seems to be moving onto a series of concentric circles without any forseeable end.

Candy store. What had Business Card meant by that? The rug was about to be yanked on everybody and the candy store.

Candyman had a specific meaning in the 80's. A candyman was a dealer of drugs. And wasn't cocaine the "drug of choice" for hard-working, ambitious, upscale young professionals? And wasn't the world of the 80's jam-packed with gentleman junkies selling stock and real estate and advertising concepts? Snorting cocaine to keep high and energetic and on the move and then shooting heroin to come back down to gain a little sanity and a little sleep?

Maybe Pistol and some of the other hotshots at Evergreen Institute were into the sideline of dispensing a little chemical motivation along with the psychological kind?

One of Bunny's girlfriends had fallen into the Emergency Room at Bedford General Hospital. She'd showed up there with the general composition of a ragdoll, Bunny had said. Drugs were capable of that, of distending people's strings, of turning them into something with limp arms and beads for eyes you gave a child to cuddle and play with.

I wonder if Bedford General is presently treating a young girl for drug overdose, one who worked at Evergreen Institute and had a friend named Bunny who wasn't showing up during visitors' hours to give her flowers and crack corny jokes and ask her how she was feeling.

IT IS AROUND NOON NOW. ONE OF OUR RENTER STUDENTS has returned from his morning classes. The male one. A queer one. Chemical engineering major. Coke bottle glasses. Hair with no discernible part. No interest in girls, not even our other renter, who isn't bad looking by a mile. Every once in a while I catch him with a certain glint in his eye, like he is toying with the notion of blowing the roof off our house just to see how high it will go.

We are in the kitchen. I'm at the table, trying to formulate a plan for dealing with Pistol. He's at the stove, trying to figure out the cooking instructions on a can of spaghetti.

The telephone rings from the wall near the stove. Carsten answers it.

My plan for dealing with Pistol is coming together in my mind. Slowly but workably, it is coming together.

"It's for you," Carsten says. "Beano."

As I take the receiver from him, my plan is forming its finishing touches.

As I hear Beano say into my ear, "Roomie, listen up and listen good. Here's our plan . . ."

IT IS NIGHT NOW. I AM IN A TELEPHONE BOOTH DOWNTOWN. Pistol will be calling the booth's number at nine p.m., troubled by his outstanding crimes and his endangered network. I shall be untroubled and confident, backed by my eastern firepower and the pervasive way we have of finding out things and using events to our advantage.

Beano and I expect this to be one big piece of chocolate cake.

Earlier in the day, during regular business hours, I paid a visit to the massive monolith of Columbia Tower. It rams fifty stories up through the clouds, but Evergreen Institute was only on the eighth, still straining and striving for greatness, but on its way up.

Surreptitiously, I appeared at Evergreen's offices posing as a salesman of audio-visual equipment—overhead and carousel slide projectors, speakers and microphones. I'd done a stint of work at the college's Media Services Center and while I didn't know my stuff backwards and forwards, I knew enough to be credible; and I still had some training manuals.

In Reception, I met a Ms. Kindsfather who sent me down a wide, adjacent hallway to see a Ms. Benedetti, who was secretary to Mr. Anson, who was head of Purchasing. I sat on a straight-back chair that looked and felt Georgian and was expensively upholstered, my well-worn attache on my lap, awaiting my turn at Mr. Anson along with three others who were before me.

Ms. Benedetti was not overly fond of my presence. I had no fancy, embossed business card to present, like Evergreen's, and so I was treated to more icy stares than the other peddlers-in-waiting, something on a par with someone selling pencils out of a tin cup.

But I remained undaunted. I was there to buy time and listen to as many male voices as I could and to put on a reasonably good show for Mr. Anson when my turn came.

While I waited, a steady stream of male employees came into the hallway from inner offices, speaking with each other or to the stonefaced Ms. Benedetti. But none spoke with the voice I'd overheard on the golf course, none with the deadly, dispassionate voice of Pistol.

Fifty minutes and thirty voices later I'd moved up to First Chair. A wall clock said it was nearly lunchtime. I heard Ms. Benedetti's purse snap shut very audibly.

"Mr. Collins?"

"Yes?"

"Mr. Anson is on his way to a luncheon meeting. He will see you at two-thirty, or as nearly after that as can be managed."

"Yes, of course."

"He would prefer rescheduling you for tomorrow. Say, eleven a.m.?"

I was getting the lunch-hour shuffle, the Anson runaround. He likely had instructed Ms. Benedetti to ink me in when hell froze over.

"Yes, eleven is fine. Thank you."

ACTUALLY, EVENTS COULD NOT HAVE WORKED OUT BETTER. I found my way back to Ms. Kindsfather's corridor just as a bevy of doors heaved open for lunch. In an instant the Ms. Kindsfather Hallway became like the decks of the *Titanic* when word began to reach its passengers that there weren't enough lifeboats.

The tide carried me towards a bank of elevators. I rode it, listening to all the male voices surging and ebbing around me. One huge wave of humanity caught me and hurled me into one of the elevators, dashing me to the back wall. Briefcases and purses and oversized carry-all bags jabbed at my rib cage as two dozen voices murmured around me.

Ahead of me, near the front of the car, was a tall man in a luxurious camel-hair topcoat. He was easily a head taller than anyone else in the car and it flashed on me then that Pistol had been tall enough to look down on Business Card at the golf course.

And then, on the heels of my thought fell Camel Hair's voice, insinuating and piano-wire taut, as he spoke to another man standing to his left in the elevator.

". . . those Phoenix seminars. Fellow, tell Snowden out there I don't care if a 747 *will* fit inside the Ramada's main conference room, we want a *retreat* atmosphere, something rural, something in the country. And we don't sign a contract until we have that assurance."

"I'll get right back to Snowden after lunch, sir."

"That's a good fellow."

It was the voice. And that indifferent, sociopathic use of the term *fellow* Beano had warned me about. Create distance between yourself and others and everyone becomes expendable. Cold, distant, impersonal. Pfft-pfft. Like Business Card out on the golf course.

When the elevator's doors opened in the lobby, the crowd kept me

back in the pack and Pistol increased the distance between us as he stepped smartly down the clotted lobby.

A young girl in ugly, clumpy Minnie Mouse shoes bumped me solidly. She didn't waste time in apology. It was only a glancing blow and I didn't die.

"That man up ahead," I said to her. "The one in the camel-hair topcoat. The tall one. Do you know who he is?"

"Oh, that's our Mr. Darke. The Assistant Director."

"Mr. Darke. You're telling me."

"I'm told he's very nice," the girl said.

I smiled a smile with a slender crack in it. "Don't believe all you're told," I told her.

AT THREE O'CLOCK, I CALLED MR. DARKE FROM THE TELEPHONE booth. I minced no words. I told him I was Mr. Brucker from the East Coast. I told him my people had made me aware that his network had experienced an unforeseen breakdown. I told him I was here in town to put people in place to relieve him of the risk and responsibility of distribution and collection.

"The distribution and collection of *what,* Mr. Brucker?"

I told him that beating around the bushes was tedious and unproductive. I mentioned his candy store and his particular brands of sweets. I told him his people were unprofessional and that it was time professional people took over. Or his candy store would experience sudden and dramatic business reversals.

We would meet in his office tonight and discuss the arrangements. He was to call me back on my mobile phone at nine p.m. There was no need for him to get tangled up with a mobile operator, I told him. The phone was cellular. I told him I would be busy with other matters until then and hung up.

I waited in the booth. A minute later the phone jangled. I picked up the receiver.

"Brucker here," I said.

The connection was broken. It was Pistol. He was just checking.

IT IS NOW 9:03 P.M. IF THEY'RE PUNCTUAL, THEY'RE PLIABLE. Darke seems to be borderline fearful. Across the street from my phone booth, the Columbia Tower is shining like a black diamond monolith. People are busy at work in it on every floor. Lots of midnight oil. Like the KGB slogging away around the clock in all those Moscow ministries as they designed the master plan to bury the world. Or sought new ways to sell candy.

The phone rings. At 9:05 precisely. Pistol has decided to pull his trigger.

"Brucker."

"This is Julian Darke. I am in my office, Suite 836 on the eighth floor. We'll be alone. I've left the name of Spears with the security guard in the lobby. You're here for an executive interview with Evergreen Institute."

"You've made a wise decision, Mr. Darke. Expect me in about a half-hour."

"A *half-hour?* I thought we could have all this taken care of more quickly than that."

"I have another engagement to honor first. One-half hour."

"Very well, Mr. Brucker."

I step from the booth and go into the Mecca Cafeteria. I find Beano enscounced in a rear booth going over a huge slab of cherry pie slathered on top with vanilla ice cream.

"Dextrose binge," he says. "High energy, many new cavities."

I tell him where I'm to meet Pistol. Beano pushes his pie aside, unfolds some engineering drawings on the tabletop and makes some notations and arrows in pencil, then jams the drawings back into an inside pocket. He has his pie ala toothache finished in a wink.

"Do you think a half-hour will be enough time?" I ask.

"Should be," Beano says. "If I make all the lights."

He is out the door of the Mecca Cafeteria and gone, the green backpack bobbing on his back as he goes.

I wait in the cafeteria the prescribed half-hour, nursing coffee and noting humanity's passing parade of night people. When the time is up, I go out of the Mecca, cross the boulevard and go into the lobby of Columbia Tower. The dead-eyed security guard passes me without a second glance. I am already ten minutes late for our meeting, but Beano can use the extra time.

I ride an empty elevator to the eighth floor. Well, the plan has been put into motion. We've played the hand we've been dealt, and we've run our strategic bluff. And we've got that Case Ace in our hand. Now, if we're only allowed to play it.

Another minute and I'm back in the Kindsfather Hallway again, with its sentinel desks of Evergreen's executive secretaries stretching on in the distance. A sharp left and into the less intimidating Benedetti Hallway. I really don't like the looks of this. I'm moving *away from* the officers of the top level managers and into the outlands of rooms for file clerks and mimeographic gremlins and janitorial supplies. Julian Darke has planned our meeting to happen in an out-of-the-way place,

the way he did it with Business Card out on the golf course. Pfft-pfft. No muss, no fuss, no witnesses.

What the hell. This will all work itself out in our favor. We got the two kids running the Grand Illusion tonight and they can't send us into Chapter Ten in one evening; and Beano's holding up his end. So, what's to fret over, Chet Atkins?

Another jog into another corridor and there it is, Suite 836—a set of tall double doors with doorknobs that would choke a horse. *CONFERENCE.* Julian Pistol Darke and I are to have an exclusive, way-out-to-hell-and-gone executive session.

And I think I know his agenda.

Pfft-pfft.

Beano tells me there'll be plenty of cops, enough to throw a charity football game between the Badgers and the Pigs. I hope he's got all his logistics right.

THE DOOR IS UNLOCKED AS PRE-ARRANGED. THE ROOM IS huge enough to bowl a few lines, with a long, buffed mohogany table down the middle and six high-backed chairs on either side and a solitary chair at one end where the board chairman sits. That's where Pistol is sitting as I enter, his angular body hiked over to one side and sprawled back just a bit, a portrait of a relaxed man who is in control of this situation.

"Come in, Mr. Brucker," says the chilly, dispassionate voice. "Come in, fellow."

He gestures for me to sit in the first chair on his right. There is an unopened attache case on the desktop and Darke is caressing it with the fingers of his right hand, as though it were some sort of house pet that's been desk-trained.

Before sitting, I ask if we can have a window opened. I complain of the room's stuffiness and the air *is* musty and thin and so I don't have to make an unnaturally strong case.

"Behind the drapes, fellow. Cord on the left."

They are tall, angular bay windows, stretching straight to the ceiling. They slide horizontally, like patio doors. I open one of them to a foot's width and leave the wine drapes full-open to showcase the lights of the city.

I return across the room and take my seat. Darke rhymes with shark and that's what Pistol looks like in the gray, distant eyes, like a shark sizing up and circling his next meal.

"When you're ready, I'd like to hear your proposition, Mr. Brucker."

"In due course, Mr. Darke. First, it should be impressed upon you that we are aware of all your recent troubles. We know of the bridge suicide-murder. And we know of your own two killings on the golf course. With little effort, we can see to it that you're arrested and convicted of those indiscretions. By the same token, those incidents can also be forgotten."

"Leverage. Very good, fellow. I am impressed."

Pistol pauses in the discussion to sweep aside a section of wall panel behind him to expose ranks of liquor bottles, glasses and other bar accoutrements all recessed nicely into the wall. I am grateful for the delaying tactics. They give Beano more precious time and he needs it like the very air he breathes.

"Drink, Mr. Brucker?"

"Thank you, no."

"Suit yourself, fellow."

Pistol makes his drink and takes a preemptory sip with his back turned. When he swings around on his heels, an evil smirk is vanishing from his lips, but with traces left.

"Tell me about my candy store, Mr. Brucker," he says as he reclaims his lordly seat at the head of the conference table.

"Cocaine and heroin," I answer swiftly and simply. "The former for the workaholic's exhilaration and false sense of well-being, the latter for the trip back down from the heavens without crashing in flames."

"Please go on, fellow."

"Cocaine is cocaine. It's a little like a bad cook boiling water. It really can't be screwed up. Heroin, on the other hand, comes with a quality control problem. There is good heroin and there is bad. That's what happened to Bunny's friend. Bunny dealt her some low-quality heroin, her system rejected it and she landed in a hospital emergency ward."

Pistol's eyes widen like kitchen dishes, white and gleaming with utter surprise. "How could you know about that? I only learned about that set of incidents last night from Castleman."

"There is more than a single way to infiltrate a network, Mr. Darke," I say, using a curveball to confuse him at the plate. "But that is an ancillary issue. We can solve your heroin problems. And we can set up a more professional sale and distribution system, as well."

"*Set up?* Problematical semantics. Don't you mean *take over?*"

"Aid and assist," I say. "Whatever people of yours we use, we can also guarantee their protection from arrest."

"If you use *any* of my people, you mean."

DARKE'S GLASS IS EMPTY, EXCEPT FOR THE RESIDUE OF two ice cubes. He begins to rotate the small cubes slowly, around and around, like a mini centrifuge. The hollow clacking sound they make heightens the already acute sense of tension I feel. His other hand hasn't moved from caressing the attache case.

I see the eyes grow dusty and distant again, like the cobra's gaze when its mind has been made up to attack.

"Well, fellow, let me tell you. I don't know who in hell you are, but I can tell you your name isn't Brucker and you aren't from the East Coast and *your people* probably consist of your mother who checks behind your ears every morning and some other lunatic relative who put you up to all this. Hell, you're a damn *kid*. Either you're here to wring some kind of confession out of me, or through some sort of dumb, cosmic luck you've stumbled onto some very private affairs. Yes, the candy store and the network. Now, just how would you know those terms?"

I hear two sharp, metallic clicks, very much like the click when Ms. Benedetti closed her purse and shut me off at the pass with the Anson runaround. I see the lid of the attache case lift slightly and then out it comes in Pistol's hand, the pistol with its barrel elongated by the silencer.

"You were out at that golf course last night, weren't you, fellow? When I showed up there with Joe Castleman to listen to his sad tale about having to dump poor Brenda O'Hare off a bridge like a sack of wheat . . ."

O'Hare. *Bunny*. Of course. The blanks are filling themselves in like cream shooting into an eclair from a pastry gun. Oh-oh. Shooting and gun. Very poor choice of words for these tender circumstances. And now, Business Card's name get filled in, too. Joe Castleman. Of the Joseph Pfft-pfft Castlemans.

Julian Darke is wagging the pistol a little. The dusty image of the swaying cobra's head pops into my mind again; it is damn difficult to dispel.

"Either you were on that golf course, or you saw me shoot the guard at the Briarwood gatehouse and put the two of them together. Is that it, fellow?"

"Other way around. I was on the golf course and read about the second and third killings in this morning's paper."

"And then you come waltzing in here with this Mister East Coast I'm Taking Over story . . ."

"Which you let me run with . . ."

". . . for personal amusement. I read you like a nickel comic book,

fellow. Right from the time of your call to me on your *mobile, cellular* telephone. You don't think people have the brains to double check a thing like that? I dialed the number right back, but you were smart enough to stay by the phone. But I have a friend at the telephone company, fellow. I merely did a little chemical bulwarking in exchange for the location of a phone number."

"Fostering chemical *dependence,* you mean."

"You called me from a damn *telephone booth* down on the street. Outside the Mecca Cafeteria."

The barrel of the pistol is still swaying from side to side across my chest. Beano and the cops are cutting it *very* close here.

"But kid, I give you credit," Julian Darke is going on and his tone sounds so much like a summation I begin to slide into deep depression, like the poor sap who's shining shoes in front of the building he once owned. "Without seeing my face or knowing my name, you did a good job tracking me down. I don't know how in hell you did it, but it was a damn fancy piece of work."

"You drove Joe Castleman's car out of Briarwood," I say to Darke. "From where he'd parked it on Penwick Road. You left it on a city street somewhere and then walked back to Briarwood on foot. You stopped off at the gatehouse, shot Joshua Biggs, took his logs and then made your way back home. You left Castleman's body there behind the green of No. 9 and cleaned out his wallet, hoping that would be enough to disconnect yourself from the old network, so you could begin to construct a new one."

"But . . ."

"But you dropped one of Castleman's institute business cards."

"Clumsy of me," said Julian Darke. "But not a fatal blunder. You've come alone here tonight. And you haven't brought the police with you. All can be remedied, I think."

"I don't think so, Mr. Darke. First, strictly speaking, I *didn't* come alone. There is Beano. And Beano assures me he is bringing the police. And Beano's assurance is as good as gold in the bank."

"Beano? Come on, fellow. No one named *Beano* exists beyond your active collegiate imagination. It's the famous mobile, cellular telephone all over again."

AS IF TO SUGGEST THERE IS NOW GOING TO BE A CHANGE in the tone and subject matter of our executive conference, Darke shifts his weight in his chair so that his body comes to a more rigid, upright position. An action position. Or, as the renowned rock climber and criminal investigator, Beano Davis, puts it: Oh-oh.

"Fellow, let me take you on a brief walking-tour of my situation here at Evergreen Institute. I've worked my way up from course salesman, to lecturer, to Assistant Director. I arrange the seminars, hire guest speakers and lecturers, help to formulate curriculum, advise on capital investments, hire and fire. And in a year or two, we'll offer a nation-wide correspondence course.

"Now, in exchange for all of that, I'm paid a handsome little salary, plus incentives and bonuses. In addition, there is the other thing."

"The chemical bulwarking," I say.

"Some of our clients, unfortunately for them but fortunately for me, have been discovered to have chemical-dependent personalities. I've managed to plug into that dependence. I distribute large amounts of cocaine and heroin to a small network of dealers and I take a large slab of the profit pie. And I handle it all right under our director's nose and right under the noses of all the department heads and even the C.E.O. And now, you come shuffling and bumbling along and place all of that in serious jeopardy.

"Well, fellow, what am I to do about that? Supplicate myself before you? Shed tears of contrition? Mend my ways? Confess to drug-dealing and murder? Turn my life into a modern ruin?"

"I think I know the answers to those questions," I say to Julian Darke, with a sad twist of irony in my voice.

"Of course you do, college boy. Victims and survivors, that's what makes up the world. Just two camps. And you pitch your tents in one or the other . . ."

THREE OR FOUR TIMES DURING THE COURSE OF OUR EXECUtive chat, a spotlight flashes across the windows briefly. Julian Darke doesn't notice these ephemeral flashes because he is seated a little down-range of them. But I notice them. Because I am expecting them.

And now I also here the sirens of a police car or two. To Darke, they are only the urgent wails bespeaking there is danger in the city at night. To me, they're cries from the nightingales of mercy.

". . . several options here," Julian Darke is continuing, as the pistol maintains its evil swaying. "You could be shot as an intruder . . ."

"Only I'm on record downstairs with the security guard as an invitee."

"Easily explained. You've impersonated my interviewee, Mr. Spears, to act upon some long-smoldering grudge, or to do a bit of late-night corporate thievery. The windows there offer an inviting device. Eight stories. The police will spend most of the night collecting pieces of you and putting them in paper sacks . . ."

"You'll spend most of the night chasing me around this table."

"No, Mr. Brucker. Once around and then you'll be shot."

More spotlights are playing across the glass now. The uninformed might conclude we've got a full-blown Hollywood movie premiere rolling out its red carpet down on the street. But it is only accusative limelight being cast upon a vertical miscreant and his masterful plan.

Even Julian Darke now recognizes there is light coming into Suite 836. The hard resolve is draining from his expression like some plug has been pulled on his confidence and its making a pitiable little pile on the floor. The barrel of his pistol is drooping a little and is becoming less a formidable weapon and more a harmless object all the time.

And now, Darke's attention is really becoming fractured, because someone begins to pound a very heavy fist on the door of Suite 836, with authoritative pronouncements of "Open up! Police!" between each series of blows. My host's head and eyes are doing frantic double-duty between the flashing lights at the window and the pounding blows at the door. And all the while he's still got that highly incriminating pistol in his hand and doesn't quite know what to do with it.

When his helpless, hapless eyes and mine hook, I shoot him an amiable grin. "Beginning to get the feeling this is a remake of an old Marx Brothers comedy and we're in it?"

But Julian Darke doesn't appear to have the heart and composure to answer.

And then the dangling presence of yet another principal appears out beyond the window glass. The legs and lower torso are swinging freely in the black night as the half-body in its network of harnesses and slings moves across the glass in the intersecting lasers of the spotlights.

Julian Darke is now *irretrievably* lost for words.

"That's Beano," I say to him. "Helluva space walk, don't you think?"

THE HARNESSED, BONY BODY, OPERATING ON AN INTRICATE system of slings and pulleys, begins to lower itself into full view, an improbable, four-legged spider. I watch with admiration as Beano frees a hand and slides the window open a little farther and then he swings himself forward and backward, forward and backward, until his feet catch the window ledge and he's standing in the opening, that long, horsey face of his cut in a deadpan expression like he's with Acme Window Washers and just putting in a normal day's work.

"Found the expansion and stress crack on York Avenue," he tells me. "Better take that pistol away from him, Jonathan. The damn thing's liable to go off and then you've got your locked-room murder

mystery for the cops to sort out, and they've got enough on their hands as it is."

I do as Beano suggests and the pistol comes out of Julian Darke's hand as easy as slipping a Butterfingers out of its wrapper.

"All this polished marble and glass," labors Beano's voice from the window ledge. His breathing comes in short gasps and he's dripping perspiration from his eye brows and chin, but he looks to be in pretty good shape. "I used the Leeper cam and about two hundred Logan hooks coming up. Glad I decided to harness-up and use the slings, else I'd still be out there as a still-life painting hanging on for dear life."

"How long have you been outside the window?" I ask.

"Five, six minutes. Long enough. I heard it all. The killings, the drug-dealings, the works. I climbed up to the tenth floor and found a two-inch overhang. I worked my way across on the Logans until I was directly above Suite 836 and then just came down on the slings and pulleys. I know I look all tangled up like the fly trapped in the spider's web, but everything's under control." Beano reaches inside a vest pocket and pulls out a wad of papers. "Better get these back to the City Engineering Department sometime tonight, Jonathan. The night clerk down there is a guy named Beaverton. I swear. We owe him twenty bucks. Man, Jonathan, I never saw so many cops in one place in my *life!* Well, I gotta go . . ."

"You aren't coming *inside?*"

"Negative, roomie. I still got forty-two stories to go. Of course, it's gonna be device-aided, interrupted climb, but I'll be Columbia Tower's first. The purists are gonna scoff, but what the hell. I got our Case Ace played, you've got Pistol there looking like somebody just drop-kicked his dog into the Grand Canyon and Beaverton down at the City Engineers says the city is about to undergo massive Manhattanization. Massive structures to destroy views and block out the sun. A rock-climber's dream, roomie!"

"You're going to attempt to climb the rest of . . ."

"Give me three minutes before you let the cops in to haul off our captured culprit," Beano interrupts, as he begins to adjust the maze of slings and harnesses ensnaring his long, stick-figure body. "That should give me enough time to get back up to the tenth floor and across to the expansion crack again. See you in the Tarzan flicks, roomie!"

With a few hikes on the slings, Beano is up, up, up until there is just a pair of dangling legs and then these, too, disappear.

I time his three minutes on my watch. Julian Darke is slumped just a trifle in his chair. I guess there's no more forlorn and pitiable sight than a captured criminal waiting to be trucked off to jail. Looks just like a

kid who's just had his cookie stolen.

THREE MINUTES. I LET IN THE COPS. THERE ARE FOUR uniforms and a detective sergeant in a rumpled suit you bury paupers in whose name is Hammermaster. He is all fire and brimstone coming from the eyes and demands to know who in hell is the building climber and what's his goddamn dementia praecox freaking problem anyway and where am I hiding his ass, because every cop on the face of the earth and fifty more above sea-level *knows* he climbed his butt inside an eighth floor window . . .

"He's hit the bricks again," I tell Hammermaster.

"And just what in hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

"He's locked himself back into the expansion crack on the York Avenue side of the building. He intends to climb the rest of it."

"Goddamn dementia praecox mountain goat freakhead," says Hammermaster. He spots the pistol I'm carrying at my side and wonders, if it wouldn't be entirely too much trouble, would I explain its presence.

"Belongs to Mr. Board Chairman over there," I say, indicating Julian Darke, sitting his chair now like a heap of dirty laundry. I go on to explain about the two killings in Briarwood and about the death of Brenda O'Hare on the interstate and then present Hammermaster with the murder weapon.

We've wrapped up so much major crime here that Hammermaster offers his virtual guarantee that I won't be arrested for trespass and that Beano will escape being charged with similar trespass and reckless endangerment and perhaps several other statute violations Hammermaster isn't going to identify or pursue.

And then the detective sergeant and the bluecoats and their dapper, downcast arrestee are gone out the door to Suite 836. I close the window and put the drapes back in order. I discover Julian Darke's scotch whiskey to be twelve years old and so I pour out a nice, hefty glassful and toast Beano's dramatic Case Ace in his absence and down it to the dregs.

In five minutes more I'm back down on the street, feeling the flush of our success and with that good scotch sloshing my insides. It's a nice evening, with lots of stars and with the heavens purple and coldly clear and seeming to stretch upward without final measure.

I click across pavement, off the ground a bit and feeling only my heels making friction. I go to the York Avenue side of the building. Across the street from Columbia Tower a bulging crowd has gathered—perhaps fifty or sixty curious souls—to watch Beano's

intrepid ascent of the north face of the tallest office building in town. Police cruisers clog the entire block and barricades are erected at both ends. Cruiser spotlights are trained upward on Beano and he is nicely showcased at roughly the twelfth floor as he moves carefully up the expansion crack with his Logans, his slings and his pulleys. In another half-dozen stories he'll be out of their range, but the night-time illumination from surrounding skyscrapers will keep him visible from below.

AND SO IT GOES THROUGH THE LONG NIGHT. THE CROWD swells to three hundred. Runners go for sandwiches and coffee at the all-night Mecca Cafeteria just down York Avenue near a telephone booth where some very curious calls have been transmitted this evening.

At a few minutes past three a.m. in the morning, Beano hikes himself up to his final Logan cleat and is pulled to safety onto the roof of Columbia Tower by nearly a batallion of city cops.

We watch him pause on the brink and wave down to the crowd below and we answer him with a prolonged, deafening cheer to salute Beano's conquest of the summit.

He is magnificent. ●

WHERE'S THE LETTER?

I read Mike Shayne every month. In the February issue, a puzzle was printed to find the Purloined Letter A, B, or C. I have not found same and would appreciate your help if possible.

Ralph E. Wright, Sr.
217 Carroll Rd.
Riviera Beach, MD 21122

It's the letter C drawn upside down in Sherlock Holmes' ear. In case any of you couldn't find the letter in the January issue, it's the letter A located near the right-hand edge of the drawing opposite the hanging man's ear.

Did he want to rob a bank? Sure, why not? What else did he have to do?

Working Stiff

by CARL HOFFMAN

ED FENTON LOOKED AT THE BIG UGLY PISTOL IN HIS nephew's hand and told himself: *He wants to rob a bank. Rob a bank, my nephew Randy. And he wants me to help.*

"What you gonna lose, that's what I'd like to know," the kid was saying in his excited motormouth voice, a pair of gulls flying rings around each other astern of Ed's little boat as it cruised slowly through the green waves of Lake Michigan. "You're laid off fourteen months. What you got to lose."

Randy was twenty-five, thin and wiry, his long black hair caught in a pony tail by a leather thong at the back of his neck. His beard was wispy, his teeth stained yellow from too many cigarettes. He wore a gaudy tee shirt with the name of a rock band on it, and greasy bluejeans, a thick keychain on the belt. He was half a year out of work himself.

"Think of them fatcats that own the factories," he said. "Seen any of 'em standing next to you in the unemployment line? You bet you haven't."

Ed stared at Randy's face as the kid talked on, explaining the plan in that yammering excited voice. He could hardly believe that his favorite nephew—the crazy one, the wild man who drank a case of beer every Saturday night and trawled bars for blonde secretaries in tight bluejeans—was saying these crazy things to him as they sat quietly in the cockpit of Ed's battered old sailboat, skimming along under a knife-edge of canvas tinted red by the lowering sun of a hot August day. But then he looked again at the pistol where Randy had set it on

the bench between them, and the blue-finished Colt almost persuaded him. He'd seen guns like it thirty years ago in the Marines—massive and ugly, eight and a half inches long, with a five-inch barrel and a magazine capable of holding seven .45 caliber cartridges. It bucked like a chainsaw when you fired, and each bullet could penetrate six 7/8" pine boards, not to mention who-knew-how-many human bodies.

"What you got to lose, just tell me that," Randy said. "The union don't care about you. Neither does the guy you used to work for. 'Less you find another job in the next month, you're gonna have to sell this boat. Save it, why not. Hit back. They could care less about *you*."

Ed didn't know how to answer. "Come on, Randy. I'm a working stiff, not a bank robber."

"You mean you *used* to be a working stiff. I ain't noticed you collecting any paychecks lately."

Well he couldn't deny *that*. Twenty-six years a carpenter, and what good had it done? His unemployment comp ran out two months ago.

"Yeah, but hell. Robbing a bank. You go to prison for that."

"Only if you're stupid," Randy said, "and we ain't stupid. We got it planned out right to the end—" and he was off again, the voice excited but also thrilling, so that after a moment Ed too came under the incantation, lost the words and heard only the sweet excited tones as they tripped over each other, until it was almost music, until it thrilled him like music. If only it were that simple. He felt the breeze, heard the occasional slap of a wave against the bow.

"So that's how we do it," the kid summed up. "You see any mistakes, show 'em to me. I'd like to know."

He giggled abruptly, pleased with himself. He tipped his head back and poured some Miller's down his throat, giggling. "What you say, Uncle Ed? How about knocking over a bank just for old times' sake?"

"Just for old times' sake." But Ed wasn't listening. He was looking back toward the shoreline swept clean of its smudging pollution. The lights starting to flicker on, glittering like jewels in the dusk. His city as pretty as it ever got, the sunset smoothing the flanks of town hall, the courthouse, the empty machine shops and tractor works. The air was cool and mellow, and it went down like beer. If only it could last.

But of course it couldn't.

"What you say, Uncle Ed?"

"Let me think about it."

Randy giggled, gulping his brew.

SCULLY'S TAVERN: A CAVE, DANK AND DIMLIT, A COOL hollow shelter against the heat and choking humidity of the night. Red,

yellow, orange, green, red: colored lights sliding through the bubble machine, glistening off the ranks of bottles on the shelf behind the bar. Ed Fenton, forty-nine years old, a big man with a trace of a gut and thinning sandy hair, sat with a beer glass enfolded in his huge tan mitt. The boat was an hour in its berth, and he was talking with Dick Geraci, his best friend, smaller, quicker, darker, a career cop, twenty-five years behind the badge.

"—so he told me he'd promised some friends he'd shoot pool with them," Ed was saying. "I believe that, sure. Friends with lots of blonde hair and pink hot pants."

"Wouldn't be surprised," Dick Geraci answered. "Randy's the kind they'd go for."

"What do you think of him?"

"You mean Randy?" Dick sipped his brew, but now his face was different, assuming its cop look, watchful, gauging. He could calibrate Ed's mood to a tolerance of 1/64th of an inch. "You worried or something?"

"Sometimes I wonder. He's been laid off six months now. Nothing to do. A young guy like that, used to spending."

Dick tossed off the PBR.

"Tell the truth. He got his hands in anything?"

Dick cleared his throat. "There've been rumors, yeah, but I don't know how much to believe. The dicks—hell, you ought to see them sucking up to the captain. He's got informants on the brain. So they all head down to State Street and grease some beer belly. Talk to a guy in an alley, hand him a sawbuck from the fund, and run back and write a report that makes it sound like the Dillinger gang's coming through."

"So Randy's had his name mentioned?"

"Yeah. But that doesn't mean anything so far as I'm concerned."

"You should've told me before."

"I figured you had enough bad news. Rachel and your job. And it's just a lot of air, probably. Like I said."

"What'd he do? Drugs or something?"

"Drugs, that's what they say. And a quick stop and a tavern."

"Guns?"

Dick nodded while Ed thought about it, feeling the hope inside him, the hope that what Randy said on the boat was just beer talk, shrivel like wood chips in the flames. Randy, his favorite nephew, his sister's boy. He remembered a July Fourth fifteen years ago, Randy playing in the dirt with a beat-up toy road grader while his souse of an old man mixed Pabst and shots and worked himself into a surly rage until he found an excuse to hit the kid.

"He's been talking about moving," Ed told Dick. "Trying to find work down south."

"I wish him luck." Dick gulped more beer. "Twenty years ago a cop felt he was really doing something useful. Protecting the good people from the bad people. Not that we had much of a problem then. Drunk teenagers on the weekends, high school kids fighting over a girl. I'll tell you one thing I've learned. It's easier to be a good person when you've got money in your pocket."

He drank again, studied the lights. Yellow, green, red.

Dick said: "Sometimes I don't know which side I'm on anymore. It's a damn good thing somebody invented booze."

Red, green, blue, yellow, orange.

"But how are you, Ed? Any prospects?"

"Who's going to hire a fifty-year-old carpenter?"

"Sorry I asked."

They drank up and drove home in silence through empty streets, blackness hovering above the treetops, just beyond the reach of the streetlights. Ed tried to ignore it and thought of Randy holding up a quick-mart, wondering how it felt to aim a pistol at somebody, take away their money. His favorite nephew. He shivered. Better not think about it.

But he did anyway. He couldn't help it.

WHEN RACHEL LEFT HE'D MOVED OUT OF THE BEDROOM and into the living room, draping a sheet over the couch as protection against the summer humidity that gummed the furniture, and that was where he slept tonight, wearing only his shorts, feeling the images of Randy and Rachel—one with a gun, the other with a sneer—nibbling at the edges of his mind. He dozed, and his whole life wheeled through his head, around and around, twenty-six years of driving to work, sawdust powdering the backs of his arms, Rachel's taunting voice, Randy and his .45, his blue nylon windbreaker with the legend CARPENTER'S LOCAL NO. 297, around and around in the sodden choking night until he felt as if the floor beneath him was about to give way, yawn like the trapdoor of a gallows, and he jerked awake. It was 4:30, 5:00, the first rays lightening the room, and he stared vaguely as the orange sun heaved itself up through the branches and telephone poles and TV masts. Then he must have dozed again, because he woke to a tapping on the door.

It was Randy, looking like hell.

"Out all night?"

"How'd you guess."

The kid sat in an armchair, his face the color of dough, lines showing in his forehead. His clothes hung on him like sails in a dead calm, and abruptly he seemed old and shriveled, a little old man lost in the wings of the big armchair. He said, "You won't believe this, I been to the zoo."

The voice was coarse from a night of beer and cigarettes. Low and coarse and quiet, a way Ed had seldom heard it.

"No kidding."

"No kidding. I got there at feeding time. In the lion house. Ever seen it?"

Ed grunted.

"You ought to sometime. They'd just hosed out the cages, and the cats were on the march. Back and forth, back and forth. That smell, man. I didn't believe it this early. Must be the heat or something."

His eyes were shut, the lids veined and delicate, almost translucent. Ed could see the eyeballs shifting underneath.

"They musta had that lion fifteen years. He's barely got a name anymore, and his hair's falling off, half of it anyway, in spots, like he's got the mange. And he was marching back and forth, back and forth like the others, looking at me with that gut swinging like an empty leather bag. *Looking* at me, you know what I mean? I checked out those bars, man, and I thought about it. They strong enough? I mean, they aren't, and I'm breakfast. I decided it was time to move out."

Ed didn't answer.

The eyes opened, and Randy looked blearily at his uncle: "One thing I never figured, Ed. Why you stayed in this outhouse of a town as long as you did, especially with Rachel."

Ed blinked, because the answer was something you had to learn with your body over the years. It didn't take brains, it took time, years of walking out in the morning with dew on the sidewalks and the kids on their way to school, knowing there was a cabinet waiting to be finished at the shop. He glanced around the living room, filled as it was with chairs and cases and bookshelves that he had built; their clean lines and surfaces always made him think of plains and windswept skies. "I don't think I can explain."

"I guess you can't." Randy exhaled slowly, and the translucent eyelids folded down. His voice came out again, coarse and low: "What about the bank?"

"I thought you were kidding."

"I wasn't."

"You know the cops've got a line on you?"

The bloodshot eyes slid open. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Dick Geraci. I had a drink with him last night after we got in from sailing. He said they think you robbed a tavern and a quick stop."

"Crap." He shut his eyes, and there was nothing more, no other words. Just the sound of Randy's breath in the silent room with sunlight shafting in the window, inhale, exhale, the breaths lengthening and turning ragged until a tear slid from under one of his eyelids. Ed shifted once or twice. Then the breathing quieted, became soundless again. Randy's voice was almost normal: "They've got it all figured out, haven't they."

Ed didn't answer.

"One thing about you, Uncle Ed. You were always there at the right time. Remember when I was twelve and we went to the State Fair?"

Ed nodded, though he didn't remember, though Randy with his eyes closed couldn't see him nodding.

Randy continued: "I was scared of that ferris wheel. Biggest thing I ever saw. But I wanted to go on it too. Except that juicehead father of mine was off getting sauced in the brewers' pavilion, so it was you took me on it. Remember?"

"Sure." Another lie.

"I always think of that when I want to cheer myself up." But he didn't seem any more cheerful.

Then Ed became aware of the blood pumping through his body and how it seemed to accelerate, become harder and faster because there was more going on here than just Randy telling a story. He could sense the layers of thought behind what Randy was saying, and as the blood climbed slowly to his head he felt himself wavering, an ungainly burden tipping crazily on a single point of fulcrum, teetering first to one side and then the other, ready to fall either way at the slightest breath.

Randy's eyes came open again, bloodshot but not as vague as before. He said quietly: "Uncle Ed. You didn't answer the question. Want to help me with the bank?"

Ed spoke just as quietly: "All right."

The wind whooshed past his ears. Falling.

ONCE AGAIN IT WAS DUSK, THE AIR HOT AND THICK AS lard, the day's heat radiating from the pavement, the neon coming on and groups of men lounging on the sidewalks in front of bars. Voices, single words that leaped in the car windows as the three of them drove south in the stinking auto, Ed and Randy and Cisco. Cisco was behind the wheel, steering the heap with stubby brown hands, a half-pint Mexican Randy had found who-knew-where. He hadn't said a word since Ed climbed in the car. He was maybe nineteen, with bulging arm

muscles packing the short sleeves of a spotless white tee shirt, black hair thick and luxuriant on his head, two or three black whiskers curling across an otherwise-beardless chin.

Ed wondered where he'd stolen the Chevy. It reeked of french fries and motor oil, enough to make you puke.

He decided not to think about puking.

"First time I used one of these things I got the kind with the reinforced midriff." Randy was in the back seat, pulling the hacked-off leg of a nylon stocking over his forehead. He was trying to be funny, but his voice came out staccato, hoarse; he was wound tight as a coil of wire. "No good, man, the double layer makes it tough to see. It's been nude to the waist ever since." He giggled shrilly. "Ready, Eddie?"

"Sure." Ed glanced at the service .45 in his belt, the same pistol Randy had shown him last week on the boat, and tried to think of his training drills in the Marines thirty years ago, the times he'd crawled under live bullets from a machine gun. It didn't help. He felt as if he'd swallowed a baseball and it was stuck in his throat, the greasy horsehide drying up his saliva.

"Easy, right?" Randy was saying. "Piece of cake." He fumbled in a grease-stained burlap bag on the seat next to him and withdrew an odd-looking arrangement of bars and steel tubes barely larger than a pistol. With a start Ed realized it was a submachine gun.

"There she is." Cisco spoke for the first time; the bank loomed ahead on its corner, the interior bright and swarming with customers through the plate glass windows. Friday night, payday. Cisco steered the Chevy into a parking spot across the street, in the shadow of a tree. "Almost eight, timed it pretty good."

Randy looked at his uncle: "All set? You ain't gonna crap out on me, are you?"

"Keep your pants on, smart aleck."

Randy giggled, high and frantic. For a second a terrible caricature of his normal wiseguy grin was smeared across his face; then he grasped the machine gun, yanked down the nylon mask, and dismounted the car, walking swiftly and almost jauntily, as if he were enjoying himself. What an actor. Ed followed more slowly, lowering the ski mask he'd found in a closet. The baseball in his throat seemed to be expanding to the size of a basketball as they crossed the street, crossed the sidewalk, pushed through the revolving door.

THE LIGHT STUNG HIS EYES.

He heard Randy shout, then a dry mechanical snapping as the kid raised his weapon and sprayed the ceiling with a four-round burst. A

fluorescent tube popped and sputtered, bits of plastic skittering to the floor. "THIS IS A HOLD UP, SUCKERS," the kid was roaring. "LET ME SEE YOUR HANDS!"

Ed was gripped by unreality. He felt he was breathing ozone. He couldn't believe it was his nephew—it was a stranger shouting, someone he didn't know, a frightening stranger with his features mashed and squashed behind a nylon mask, brandishing an odd-looking gun as the clatter and ruckus of the bank died and the customers and employees whirled and tensed into silence. Eyes rolled in the hush, and Randy shouted, "JUST KEEP 'EM UP, JUST HOLD 'EM THERE." Under his breath he said to his uncle: "What you waiting for, take 'em."

Breathing quickly as an animal, Ed told himself: *We're actually doing it!*

He shoved the .45 in his belt and unfurled the plastic garbage bag, moving stiffly, gunsmoke piercing his nostrils. He dashed to the counter, motioned for them to buzz him through, shoved past the first teller at her station and scooped a drawerful of money into the sack with fingers as awkward as twigs. But he was doing all right, he assured himself, he was holding up his end. He moved stiffly to the next cashier, and all the time he could hear Randy's voice filling the interior of the bank, raging on and on, threatening:

"All right, all right, don't move, keep those hands where I can see 'em. I know that about now you're probably thinking about hitting those alarm buttons but I want you to just forget it because I swear to Heaven I see anyone moving I'll blow you—"

The sack was heavy in Ed's hand, surprisingly heavy now that he'd emptied the fourth drawer into it, and he heard Randy shout, "ALL RIGHT, LET'S GO," and Ed turned to rush back toward the end of the counter, telling himself, *So far so good, we're almost done,* when everything fell apart.

He saw it in freeze frames as he dashed past the first teller's station. A commotion near the revolving door, Randy turning to look at someone coming inside, the echoes of his voice dying through the bank. Ed saw the newcomer's leg emerge from the door, his arm and shoulder, the one visible hand grasping some papers which might have been checks. Then with panic in his throat he recognized the uniform, light blue short-sleeve shirt over dark blue pants, the leather belt heavy with flashlight, handcuffs, holster. And Randy turning, the gunbarrel swinging around as the policeman stepped into the lobby. But Randy didn't wait for the cop to recognize what was happening before the ceiling burned with a strobe light of muzzle flashes and the blue-clad

figure was flung sideways against a checkwriting stand. The flat snap of the machinegun bounced off the walls.

It was only when Ed got close that he recognized Dick Geraci. Dick lay on his side, moving feebly, trying to cover his face.

Then Randy had Ed by the arm and they were shoving through the revolving door, out onto the sidewalk, heat soaking up through their shoes from the concrete, the last orange glow of the sunset silhouetting buildings like black cutouts, and they dashed for the spot across the street where Cisco waited with the car. Except Cisco was gone. A flat expanse of asphalt yawned where the Chevy had been parked four minutes ago. Randy shouted, "THAT STUMPY BLACKHEADED—"

Then again he was pulling Ed, manhandling him back across the street toward the bank, pushing him toward an auto standing at the edge of the parking lot, and vaguely Ed realized it was a black and white squadcar, the motor running and the police radio crackling with static. It came to him from an immense distance: Dick's car. He'd parked it here before going in to make his deposit.

Behind the wheel, Randy giggled.

Then he pressed the accelerator and they leaped the curb, squealed into the street with the rear end banging. Once more Randy was shouting, "THAT RUNT OF A SQUATBRAINED—" He wrenched the car to the left, up a sidestreet into a residential neighborhood, the tires shrieking. "IF I GET MY HANDS ON THAT CISCO I'M GOING TO—" He wrestled the wheel around to the right, screeched to a halt in an alley behind a vacant house. "AT LEAST HE LEFT US THE SWITCH CAR. LET'S GO."

THE KID WAS ALREADY SHOVING OUT THE DOOR OF THE squadcar, hustling toward the battered Ford station wagon parked a few steps away. Ed followed vacantly, feeling as if he had been walloped with a club. Randy stopped suddenly and shouted back at him: "WHERE'S THE MONEY?"

Ed just stared.

"THE MONEY, IDIOT, WHERE'S IT AT?" shouting and starting to charge at him until mechanically Ed retrieved the green plastic bag from the black and white and lumbered to the Ford. Randy was grinding the starter as he climbed in. The kid threw it into gear, and they streaked out of the alley's mouth in a fog of greasy exhaust and singeing rubber. They roared two blocks, turned right, jetted another three, turned right again. They were on a main drag now, and they could hear sirens behind them, converging on the bank. Randy slowed

to the limit and looked in the mirror as a squadcar gunned past in the opposite direction, its rooflights flashing. But the officer behind the wheel didn't even glance at them.

The kid checked the mirror again to make sure the police car was gone. Then he giggled. "Well how about that?"

Ed made no answer.

"Well did we take that bank or did we take that bank," the kid said, his motormouth shifting into overdrive, "I bet this crummy town ain't seen nothing like it since the day Baby Face Nelson—"

Of course he didn't notice that Ed wasn't talking.

"Just one more switch now and we got it made, we sit back and count the bread and that's it—"

"You." Ed could barely find his voice. "You killed Dick."

"—and that's easy. Huh?" Randy stopped and looked at him.

"The cop. It was Dick Geraci."

For a moment Randy sat in silence, steering. Then his voice came out harsh, clipped: "So what. He tried to stop us. So what."

"The hell he tried to stop us." Ed's voice wasn't loud, even now when he had so much to be angry about; the only thing Rachel had ever taught him was how to keep his voice down. "He was coming in to deposit his paycheck, and you shot him."

For a second Randy absorbed it. Then his voice pitched an octave higher: "So what was I supposed to do, let him take us in? That's what I was supposed to do?"

"You didn't have to kill him."

The kid raved on: "That was bank robbery, Eddie boy, they put you away in prison for that, and Dick would've done it just as quick as anybody. Get it through your head, pal, it was him or us, and if you think I'm going to the box just because you've got a friend who's pig enough to wear a uniform and—"

He continued ranting, but Ed wasn't listening now, either. He was gripped by a feeling of absolute, relentless clarity as the problems of the last few months dissolved like smoke behind him. He watched the city flow past the windows of the getaway car, familiar buildings he'd seen all his life. They marched away to right and left and disappeared, and for the first time, with perfect clarity, he sensed their strangeness, as if he had suddenly been plopped down on a moon of Jupiter. The truth came to him clearly: forty-nine years in the same place, and now he was an alien. He didn't belong.

Randy screeched the car to a halt. "So let's go."

He grabbed the money bag. The driver's side door slammed. Slowly, Ed got out too.

NOW THE SUN WAS GONE. THEY WERE IN A PARKING LOT above the lakefront. A red light burned at the end of North Pier; beyond it the darkness stretched eighty miles. But Ed could hear the endless distant rolling as it wafted up to him, the one shred of comfort in the world. Then he knew what to do.

He turned to Randy. The kid was still acting as if they were in the middle of a getaway, as if they had hope, trying to unlock the door of the final switchcar. But somehow it wouldn't work. Randy cursed: "Damn it. Damn it."

Ed approached him, and Randy, still struggling with the key, turned with an angry expression on his face as if he were about to say something nasty. Ed didn't wait. He thumbed the safety of the .45 just like they'd taught him thirty years ago in the Marines and fired the first bullet straight into Randy's heart, as quick and painless as he could make it because pain wasn't the object here. The pistol bucked in his hand, and he fired three times more as the boy fell, tumbling backwards.

Randy lay on the parking lot looking old and tiny under the silver overheads.

ED TUCKED THE GUN IN HIS BELT. HE TURNED AND walked along a deserted street, studying the blank walls, the darkened windows. It wasn't far to the marina. His boat lay snug against the dock, and he felt in his pocket for the keys. Lucky he'd put them there.

Luck, sure. All along he'd known this would happen.

The engine coughed into life on the first try. A trim boat. He cast off the lines and chugged out across the harbor, the motor running slowly. The air cooled him. His sweat began to dry. He watched scattered lights from the bankside wavering like candles on the oily black surface of the water.

The red beacon loomed close; then he glided past it, beyond the pier, out of the harbor. The first lakewave slewed in, lifting the boat easily. He steered due east, getting ready to hoist the sail and switch off the engine.

He breathed the air, savoring it.

If only this could last.

But of course it couldn't. In his waistband he felt the weight of the service .45. There were three bullets left.

More than enough. ●

Sure his life was on the line, but it was worth taking the chance in order to play a gig with Solly Cole!

Blues in the Night

by ROBERT CHESMORE

EIGHTEENTH AND VINE STREETS. THAT WAS WHERE THE heart of Kansas City jazz beat the strongest back in the days when the Great Ones—Benny Moten, Yardbird, the Count—and their brothers cast bluesy melodies and spiky syncopations into the garish, smoky night.

Although soul-mate to these, saxophonist Fish Garret was living over fifty years too late and some four miles too far south to join their jam sessions. In any case the area wasn't like it used to be.

Fish didn't blow his sax as much as he would like, being deeply involved in the cocaine trade. It was a harsh and dangerous tune he now played for the well-heeled, suburban freebasers, who were his clientele.

He lived in an expensive apartment overlooking the Plaza, the elite shopping district whose buildings of Spanish architecture are festooned with colored lights every year at Christmas.

He had a roomate and fellow nose-candy merchant named Schultzy Schultze, who carried a gun and lived in mortal dread that he might in some way offend one of those dark-complexioned importers higher up in the drug chain than he and Fish.

Fish didn't possess a gun. He owned some expensive jewelry and clothes, an alto saxophone, and a clarinet. He also had a hundred and fifty jazz records, which he kept at his mother's house because of the possibility there would be a time like today when he might have to move swiftly and unimpeded.

SWEAT BEADS FORMED ON THE END OF SCHULTZY'S NOSE

and dropped onto the shirts and underwear he was packing with frenzied haste into the suitcase. Without pausing in his work he said, "By God, Fish, I don't get you."

Fish lifted his saxophone from its case. "So don't."

Schultzy slammed the lid of the suitcase down and latched it. "I'd think, with everything getting ready to blow, you'd be packing instead of screwing around with that horn. Marcus is going to be in the parking lot in five minutes."

"So let him."

"He's putting his butt on the line busting us out of the city and taking us to Denver."

"Not me."

"You're crazy."

Schultzy looked down with contempt at his diminutive black partner. He was about Fish's age. Thirty. A big, heavily bearded man.

Fish didn't look up. He lifted the saxophone to his lips. His face was oval and olive skinned. A mustache penciled his upper lip, and his eyes were black, polished gemstones.

Schultzy said, "Use your head, man. You know the narcs busted Malone. Maybe he won't spill his guts, but I ain't waiting around to find out. Them guys ain't going to wait around either till maybe you and me get picked up and endanger them by spilling *our* guts. If there's a contract out on me I don't aim to be around close enough to even hear about it."

Fish was putting a reed on his horn. He squinted, lining up the reed with the tip of the mouthpiece.

He said, "I'm staying in town to play this gig tonight, then I'm cutting out. I'll never get another chance to play alongside Solly Cole."

"I never heard of him until today."

"You wouldn't. He's only the greatest tenor man in the world."

Fish tightened the ligature over his reed. No use talking about it anymore to a guy like Schultzy. He wouldn't know what a goddam *honor* it was that Solly even knew about him, not to mention Solly's trotting all over town to find him.

Schultzy picked up his bags. "Well, see you in L.A.," he said. "That's in case you get there, which I doubt. I may get my own head blowed off right out here in the parking lot, or maybe I'll be lucky and the narcs will get me before them others guys do."

"Bye," Fish said.

FISH EXPERIMENTED WITH HIS REEDS TILL HE FOUND ONE that gave him a good, fat tone—the kind of sound you needed in a big,

gutsy band like Andy Purcell's. He put the horn back in its case. Now the sooner he got his butt out of this pad the better.

He would leave his threads behind. The sax and clarinet cases were enough to carry. He had the bread to buy anything he needed. About eight grand in the sax case and more bills in his wallet.

He and Schultzy had panicked when they heard the knock on the door this afternoon. There was no place to run to, so they had just waited. After knocking a few times Solly had said, "I know you guys are in there. I heard you talking. I'm looking for Fish Garret. My name's Solly Cole."

Schultzy whispered, "I don't know any Solly Cole."

"My God," Fish said. "Solly Cole!"

"It's a trick," Schultzy mumbled, but Fish was already at the door unlocking and opening it.

Solly came in. He was a fat man of about forty, with a dark, jowly face, hooded eyes, and a spade beard. Schultzy said later he looked like a toad with whiskers.

Unsmiling, and in a surprisingly soft voice, he told Fish about the alto sax man who wouldn't be able to work the gig in the Auditorium tonight and how he'd heard about Fish from guys who had jammed with him when they were in town. Solly would consider it a personal favor if Fish would help them out.

Would Fish do a favor for Solly Cole? There was only one answer to that.

FISH CAUTIOUSLY PEERED OUT THE DOOR, THEN HE PICKED up his instrument cases and walked down the hall. Not wanting to be confronted by a nasty surprise when the elevator door opened, he took the stairs down to the street level.

He left the apartment building and walked down into the Plaza. It was the evening rush hour, and the streets were crowded with traffic. He was hungry, but decided the first thing he should do was put distance between himself and his apartment. The arrest of a few users and small-time pushers didn't mean much, but the cops picking up Malone indicated they were going for people higher up in the crapheap. A narc could be tailing him at this moment for all he knew.

Then, of course, there were *those other guys.*

They would be sure to take an unhealthy interest in somebody like himself or Schultzy, who knew too much about the organization.

He took a cab downtown and got out in front of the Municipal Auditorium. The doors, as he expected, were locked. He walked across 13th Street and on toward the nearest entrance to the underground

parking garage, gazing uneasily about and thinking he was like one of those tin ducks in an arcade shooting gallery.

He didn't think anybody had followed the cab, but in the rush hour traffic how could he be sure?

It had occurred to him more than once that anybody who knew his jazz interests might conclude the Auditorium was the most likely place to find him tonight.

Oh well, hell, maybe he wasn't that important after all. Anyhow it was a chance he had to take if he was going to work this gig with Solly Cole.

He entered the parking garage and walked between the parked cars to the tunnel that led under the street to the Auditorium. The doors at the end of the tunnel were unlocked, and his instrument cases provided the credentials for getting past the security guard.

Folding chairs covered the arena floor. Fish walked down one of the aisles to the bandstand on the far side.

The band boy, a grown man, was setting up the band, trailing an electric cord across the stage and plugging in the music stand lights. He paid no attention to Fish.

Fish went past the bandstand to the cavernous concrete hall where the band bus was parked. Its nose was pointed toward the huge door, now closed, through which many a circus elephant and shriner's motorcycle cavalcade had passed.

Fish sat down on the bus step. Nobody was around. It was only six o'clock—three hours until the gig. He didn't mind waiting. He was hungry, but he was going to stay put. He was safer here than out on the street. Less likely to get his head blown off or feel the hairy hand of a narc on his shoulder.

He could surely get a ride out of town with the band. The concert was a one-night stand, and they would be moving on after the job. Where to, he didn't know, and it probably didn't matter. Any town would be safer than this one.

Eventually the band guys began to drift in. Fish recognized one of them—a trombone man he had jammed with a year ago. The man approached him immediately, hand outstretched. "Hey there, Fish, how's it going? You working the gig?"

"Yeah. You're Ed Spilloto, right? Play bone."

"Right." Spilloto turned to the group, which had gathered around. "Guys, this is Fish Garret, alto man. He'll blow your mind."

Fish could tell by the way the men were looking at him that they'd heard of him. It made him feel good.

One of the men said, "I guess Andy didn't get Vince sprung."

Spilloto said to Fish, "Vince is the guy you're replacing tonight. He got picked up by the local cops for possession. Pot."

Fish felt a twinge in his gut. "How'd that happen?"

"We were in a restaurant. He went into the john and lit up. A cop happened to be in one of the stalls."

Fish didn't like it a bit. The cops might take an interest in the band, and that could be bad news for Fish Garret.

Solly Cole arrived at about ten minutes till nine and quickly got out his horns. He reassured Fish when Fish said he hadn't done much note reading for a while.

In his soft voice Solly said, "The charts aren't too rough, but if you miss a note now and then don't worry about it."

FISH DIDN'T MISS MANY NOTES, BUT EVEN AFTER THEY had played five tunes he couldn't get relaxed. He'd had a couple of solos that were bombs. The ideas wouldn't come. He'd just played a bunch of notes that didn't add up to anything. He'd have to get his mind off the mob and the narcs.

He wondered if old Schultzy had made it out of town.

When intermission came Solly led Fish into the bus and produced a bottle of Jack Daniels.

"You need to loosen up," Solly said. "Maybe this will do it."

They sat on the edge of the bus seats, facing each other across the aisle.

Schultzy was right. Solly, with his dumpy build and bulging, hooded eyes did look somewhat like a toad. He had an unsmiling, mean-looking face, but his voice was soft as a purring kitten.

The bourbon glowed in Fish's empty stomach.

One of the sidemen put his head in the bus. "You guys better not light up," he said. "There was some character snooping around out here."

"A cop?" Fish said.

"Not in uniform anyway."

Fish looked quickly out the window.

"He's gone now," the sideman said.

Fish remembered the last thing Schultzy had said this afternoon about being lucky and getting picked up by the narcs before he got his head shot off.

He was sweating, and probably Solly sensed his tension because he started talking in that soft voice as though to relax him.

"How did you get the name Fish," Solly asked.

"I used to blow a fishhorn. You know, soprano sax."

"Yeah," Solly said. "Say, how about another shot?"

Fish took a stiff drink from the bottle. He said, "You suppose I could get a ride out of town on the bus?"

"No problem." He looked at Fish intently. "It's none of my business, but I was wondering if there was some kind of heat on you. You seemed worried about that guy eyeballing the bus." When Fish made no comment, Solly said, "Forget it."

BACK ON THE STAND DURING THE SECOND HALF FISH BEGAN to unwind. He dug the sounds of the band around him: the baritone sax spiralling down to the bottom of a cord; the cutting edge of four mighty bones in unison; the sax section—*his* section—rolling smoothly beneath the clipped punctuation of trumpets; the kick of drums.

In just a few hours he would be safely out of town on the bus, and the narcs and the Latin connection could go climb a rope.

He and Solly were on their feet exchanging four-bar phrases. Solly would blow a phrase, then his turn would come and he would cut Solly. then Solly would cut *him*. It was a soul-churning duel, and it went on for three choruses.

At the end, the standing crowd yelled, clapped, and stomped its feet.

Fish knew there was no way he was ever going to get higher than he was right now. Not in this world anyway.

THE BUS WAS LOADED EXCEPT FOR SOLLY AND FISH, WHO had made a last minute trip to the john.

Fish picked up his clarinet and sax cases, which he had left by the bus steps.

The shattering report of the gun rebounded off the walls of the concrete canyon. The sax case banged against Fish's hip and he staggered against the side of the bus.

Fish thought, *now, for Christ's sake, why did they have to do that? Couldn't they see I was leaving town—wouldn't be doing them any harm?*

The band boy/bus driver behind the wheel yelled, "Let's get the hell out of here."

Solly got behind Fish and boosted him onto the bus.

Fish felt a sharp pain in his side as Solly bundled him down the aisle of the lurching bus. Fish plumped down into a seat next to the window.

"You alright?" Solly asked. "You get hurt?"

"I'm okay," Fish said. He'd decided the slight pain in his side was from the sax case slamming against him.

Solly said, "Somebody was trying to kill you. I saw the gun flash and

the guy duck around the corner. Jeez, look at your sax case. There's a bullet hole in it." He turned the case around. "Damn, another hole on this side. You sure you're not hit, Fish? Goddam bullet had to go some place."

"I'm alright."

Solly opened the sax case. "Look at that," he said to Fish and the sidemen, who had gathered around, swaying and teetering in the speeding bus. "Bullet went right through the bell of his axe."

"I hope it will still play," Fish said. "Might sound kind of funny—I dunno."

"If it don't work we'll get you a loaner. Andy wants you to work the gig in Wichita tonight—maybe stay with the band steady if you want to. He's not on the bus, but that's what he said before we left."

Solly closed the sax case and boosted it up to the overhead rack. He sat down next to Fish.

"Staying with the band sounds great to me," Fish said.

He could tell by the pain coming on stronger now that there was probably a bullet in him, but he wasn't going to let on. Better to be here, safe on the bus than to go back to Kansas City and lie in a hospital, waiting for the narcs or another bullet. *And* miss the gig in Wichita.

Solly said, "The seat tilts back. We'll have a room in Wichita to clean up in. Mostly we sleep on the bus."

Fish adjusted his seat and leaned back. The pain in his side was endurable. The bullet must be just under the skin. Probably a doc in Wichita could take it out right in his office.

Solly said, "Somebody was really out to get you. I think he would have taken another peg at you if I hadn't got in the way."

"Yeah, Thanks, Solly."

"I don't mean I was a hero. All I was thinking about was getting us on the bus."

Solly didn't ask any questions. Fish was grateful for that. He handed Fish the bottle of bourbon and Fish took a drink. He was instantly nauseated, and it took all his will power to keep the booze down.

Solly put the bottle on the floor. "Feel free," he said. He settled his heavy body into the seat. "Think I'll catch a few z's."

"Me, too," Fish said.

Fish gazed out the window at the dark suburbs—the square miles of residences and town-houses where most of his clientele lived. Here and there a lighted window gleamed against the darkness. Fish thought, *probably some are my people partying; live it up, you may not get any more for a while.*

The tires sang as the bus rolled along the Intersate. They were in the country now. The Kansas prairie was visible only as a deep blackness underlying the star-hazed sky.

Some of the sidemen were talking in the rear of the bus, and Fish detected the pleasant, autumnal scent of marijuana.

He felt a warm wetness in the trousers pressing against his belly. Bleeding, but not too bad. Plenty more where that came from. How many quarts in the human body . . .?

Solly was snoring softly. Fish closed his eyes. His thoughts began to wander incoherently, the voices of the men became muted, and he dozed off.

THE LURCHING BUS AND THE DAGGER-THRUST OF PAIN IN his gut brought Fish fully awake. His suppressed scream emerged as a brief moan that went unnoticed in the babble of voices.

Somebody yelled to the driver, "What the hell are you trying to do? Can't you drive this heap?"

"Goddam tire in the road. A *tire*. Tried to miss the sumbitch."

Fish instinctively pressed his hand against the pain in his belly. His pants were sodden. He raised his hand. Blood, almost black in the dim coach light, dripped from his fingers.

He thought something in him must have torn loose when the bus hit the bump.

Solly, who had been talking to a man across the aisle, settled back in his seat without noticing Fish's condition. He quickly went back to sleep.

Fish was cold. He wished he'd kept his jacket on, but he'd just have to get along without it; it hurt too much to move.

He was suddenly panic-stricken. He searched the night outside for the lights of a town; a doc could plug that hole in his belly.

There was only one pinprick of light from a distant farmhouse.

The panic went away.

They were coming back from the fraternity gig at K.U. in Lawrence. It was snowing like mad, and the bus was colder than a well-digger's butt in the Klondike because the piano man was drunk and had opened half of the bus windows while the guys were sleeping. There the crazy bastard stood, with his shirt off, laughing at them.

Fish grinned, reliving the moment.

The smile was still on his face when Solly tried to wake him several hours later. ●

He raised the AR-15 to his shoulder and drew a bead, squeezing his left eye shut, just as he'd seen in movies. It felt surprisingly good holding the cold, smooth metal weapon that was capable of such destruction at the touch of the trigger!

The Warden

by G. WAYNE MILLER

ACCORDING TO THE FORMICA NAMEPLATE, THE BALDING and bespectacled man behind the desk was Sr. Assistant Curator.

"I ran into a trustee," the man in the Roman collar said to him. "He told me about the computer. Congratulations."

The man behind the desk recognized the voice—the voice of a friend, maybe his only friend. Dexter looked up. The Rev. Joseph Healey had another armful of documents he'd hauled out of the chilly bowels of the Albany Historical Society's 19th-Century building.

"Thanks," Dexter said. Dexter had his standard smile on his face, his standard weariness in his words. He was dressed, as always, in a loose turtleneck, tan slacks and cheap penny loafers.

"The Good Lord knows it will make this a whole lot easier," the priest offered.

"And guarantee the past a future," Dexter said solemnly.

"Exactly right. Exactly right," the priest said, as if he understood.

Fr. Healey dropped his load on the desk and pulled a chair up next to Dexter, who examined each volume with a delicate, miserly touch that would have satisfied a surgeon. "Every document is like a newborn," one of his professors once said. "Priceless. Fragile. Incapable of self-preservation."

Dexter approached his profession with much the same reverence that his friend approached the altar. So much history. So many documents under his care—every one fragile, incapable of self-preservation. Birth records, death records, marriage records. The echoes of thousands of lives, handwritten and yellowed by time, from Albany, Saratoga, Troy,

Pittsfield, all over eastern New York and western Massachusetts. You could thank Dexter for assembling that collection. His board of trustees had, in their annual report.

"I think I've reached a deadend, but I'll take copies of these, anyway," the priest said.

For three years, off and on, Fr. Healey had been digging for his roots with the able assistance of the historical society—in particular, its senior assistant curator, Philip R. Dexter Jr. Right now, he was working on a great-great uncle, perhaps descended from a king.

This was how they had met—in the cavernous main reading room of the historical society, Dexter looking scholarly but somehow lonely and frail behind his desk, the priest eager for assistance.

Dexter thumbed through the records, a practiced eye assessing their condition, his mind calculating humidity and temperature and guessing the probable levels of acid lurking in the paper. Acid was the enemy. Photocopiers were the enemy. Fingers, too—a friend's fingers, even his own fingers.

A computer would let you lock everything away, far beyond the reach of fingers or acid . . . safe, secure, forever. Time in a bottle—an electronic bottle. It was an exciting notion for the curatorial mind.

"You're lost today, Phil," Fr. Healey said. "I can see it on your face. You'd make a terrible liar. Your eyes would give you away."

"Thinking about the machine, Joe. You know how long I fought for it. Too long to compute," he said, the pun unconsciously slipping into his conversation.

"When's it come?"

"Monday. Not a day too soon."

"I suppose they'll have to train you."

"Three classes. I start tomorrow night." For the first time, his voice picked up.

"That's bridge night," the priest said, disappointment in his voice.

"I'm sorry, Joe."

"Oh, I understand. Heavens, you waited so long for it."

"We'll play next week. After I've got the BASIC of it." His weary smile freshened. Puns were Dexter's only concession to humor, and he worked hard to perfect them. Usually, they were lost on his friend.

"Exactly right," Fr. Healey said. "Exactly right."

DEXTER WAS ALONE IN THE CLASS. THE INSTRUCTOR WAS a no-frills, no-nonsense engineer who spoke of electronic intelligence the way Baptists preach the Bible—all fire and brimstone. Like a Parris Island squad leader, he marched Dexter through the mechanics of

computer operation with absolute conviction. He assigned homework, ran quizzes, expected Dexter to devour mountains of texts.

Dexter, perennial grad student, loved it.

The machine was a $73,000 Warden 254C. It offered twice the memory and speed of competitors' models costing $20,000 more. Warden was the new kid on the high-tech block, barely four years old, but already the firm had been able to snatch a good-sized slice of the pie away from big brother IBM. Fortune magazine called it a company to watch.

Jack Warden, the founder, had built his empire with a combination of solid design, aggressive marketing, innovative financing and a warranty and service provision unparalled in the field—a point that finally sold Dexter's trustees, who were squeamish about investing so many of their precious dollars in what one dismissed as an "upstart" product.

Dexter had gone everywhere in his search for the right machine. Boston, Buffalo, New York City—a dozen demonstrations in all. None compared with the Warden 254C. Even before the salesman powered up, Dexter knew this was it.

Knew he had to sell his trustees on it, no matter what it took.

The machine had it all—price, ease of operation, that money-saving service contract. And there was something else, something he could not explain. A funny feeling that was there the first time he sat down at the machine.

Almost as if he had no choice.

And what a ridiculous notion that was. A good salesman's trick Dexter supposed.

"It works brilliantly," Dexter said during his second class.

"It should. It was designed by a genius," the instructor snapped.

"FORTANly for the rest of us," Dexter said, grinning.

The instructor only looked at him queerly.

Warden attended the last class—the company called it graduation and insisted on a diploma and a framed photo of Dexter and instructor mugging at the keyboard. Warden congratulated Dexter, slapped him on the back, pumped his hand, and made him promise to spread the "Warden Word," as the ad slogan went.

JACK WARDEN WAS THE LATEST IN THAT BRAND OF LATE-20th century American folk hero—the electronic whizz kid-entrepreneur. Lately, the trade publications had taken to comparing him to Nolan Bushnell and Steve Jobs.

Warden hadn't made a splash only on the business pages. Not yet

forty, he'd wrecked two marriages, served time for drunk driving, fathered an illegitimate child. Presently, he was engaged in an ugly custody battle that was generating a lot of local ink.

More intriguing was all that talk of Warden's alleged obsession with the black arts.

No one knew where the rumors had started. Maybe it was his house—a brooding Victorian mansion whose last owner had hanged himself in the pantry, or so they said. Maybe it was that widely repeated quote that he'd sell his soul for the perfect computer.

Maybe it was Albany Mystery Number One: the disappearance of his partner, T.J. Putnam. One morning last spring, T.J. kissed his wife, slid into his Caddie and left for work. Or somewhere, because he never made it to Warden Computer. There was an investigation, a nationwide search, a generous reward that Warden put up—but T.J. never surfaced. Not even his car was found.

T.J. had been on the outs with Warden. Two big egos on a collision course. Warden himself told the cops that, and the cops told a newspaper reporter, and soon it was all over the city. The cops knew about T.J.'s debts, about some shadowy friends—but they didn't have a thing on Warden. Just this silly babble about Black Masses and devils.

Privately, Warden had to laugh. He'd clogged the courts with libel suits, but he thrived on attention. Everybody knew that. He liked to think he took his cues from Ted Turner, the only man he had ever envied.

"I hope you enjoy the machine," he said to Dexter, who had been watching him with a blend of fascination and distaste. "It's quite an invention, artificial intelligence. Quite an invention."

"Quite," Dexter said.

"Every day, they get more and more like us, these little microchips do," Warden said. "Someday, they'll be asking for the right to vote."

Then he laughed—louder and longer, Dexter imagined, than he should have.

THE COMPUTER—THE SIZE AND SHAPE OF A TOP-LOADING washing machine—arrived on Monday. A fat furniture mover with asthma unloaded it from a truck onto a two-wheeler. Dexter's teacher strode along to make sure everything went smoothly. They brought the machine down the elevator to the lowest level of the vault, the only place it would fit without tearing up floors or knocking down walls of the venerable old building. Terminals were installed in the vault and at Dexter's desk.

The engineer gave Dexter a fifteen-minute refresher course and told him to call if there were any problems. Which, he emphasized, he certainly didn't expect.

Fr. Healey came by in late afternoon.

"It's a beauty," he said, patting Dexter's terminal the way he might pat someone in his confirmation class.

"Easy to use. Watch." Dexter called up the directory. Green numbers flashed across the screen. He hit a few more keys and titles appeared. Fr. Healey had no idea what was going on, but the ghoulish glow mesmerized him. This was no kid's toy, no overgrown video game—this was Modern Technology. Even Fr. Healey, computer idiot, could see that.

"Of course, the big job is getting everything into the system. We're hiring someone full-time. I estimate it'll take her three years, minimum."

"My word."

"Worth every minute of her time."

"Bridge tonight?" the priest asked.

"Can't. We're still getting acquainted, the Warden and I."

"Maybe next week."

"When I have a better idea of what I'm doing."

"Exactly right," the priest said. "Exactly right."

DEXTER DIDN'T NOTICE WHEN JIM THE JANITOR LOCKED the doors for the night and went home. The machine was performing flawlessly, with breathless speed. Dexter was excited. Here was power. Here was obedience, intelligence, qualities so rare in human beings.

They were going to have a fine working relationship, Dexter and the Warden 254C.

At 8:05 p.m., the screen flickered and faded. Meltdown. Or only a harmless burp? Dexter repeated the check: Shut terminal off. Check fuse. Check cords. Turn on. Reboot. The screen glowed into life.

A message was flashing:

A-YOU ARE CHOSEN/

Dexter hit more keys, but the message wouldn't budge.

A-YOU ARE CHOSEN/

What was this, some programmer's idea of a practical joke? Dexter crashed the machine and rebooted. There it was again. He leafed through the troubleshooter's guide, fiddled with the back of the unit, tapped a few keys with an annoyed touch. Nothing worked.

A-YOU ARE CHOSEN/

It wouldn't go away. Dexter was frustrated—and mystified, perhaps

a little on edge. It had been a long day. He made a note to call the engineer in the morning, and he went home to a TV dinner and a night of crazy dreams.

Tuesday, the engineer found nothing wrong with Warden 254C.

"It was there, the same message, over and over. Honest," Dexter said, sounding guilty, like a schoolboy caught in a lie.

The engineer looked at him and shook his head. "Call if you have any problems. When you're sure it's a problem."

For two days, the machine worked without a glitch. Even the new hire, a young woman named Sandra Spenser, found it a breeze to operate.

ON THURSDAY, DEXTER WORKED LATE. HE WAS INDEXING marriages when the screen went dead. He rebooted. A message was waiting:

A-YOU ARE CHOSEN PHILIP DEXTER/

A small sweat sprouted on his forehead. He tried again.

A-YOU ARE CHOSEN/

Dexter felt weird, afraid, like someone was watching. He looked around the reading room. "Anybody there?" he called in a tinny voice. There was no answer, only steam pipes tuning up for a cold night.

Dexter pulled the plug on his terminal and waited until the green ghosts had fled the screen. When he turned it back on, it flashed this message:

A-GET A RIFLE PERMIT/

Dexter hit the "print" button so he could capture the message for Warden's engineer, that smart aleck, but the printer was frozen. The systems-OK light was on, but it couldn't be coaxed into action.

"Repeat," he typed onto the keyboard.

A-GET A RIFLE PERMIT/

Then it was gone, a suddenly as it had come. The screen was blank. When Dexter hit the keys, Warden 254C went obediently about the business of genealogy. But there was no more genealogy left in Dexter tonight. He scribbled a note to call the company and went home.

AS USUAL, HE WAS AT HIS DESK AT 8:30. AT 8:45, HE FOUND himself on the phone to the state Public Safety Department. Permits were $12.50, a clerk was telling him, available to citizens of six months residency without a criminal record or history of mental illness.

Would you like us to mail you an application, sir? Dexter gave his address.

Then he hung up, not sure quite what he had done or why he had

done it. Another twenty minutes, and he'd forgotten the call entirely. He never called the engineer.

Miss Spenser ate her lunch at Dexter's desk, a practice he neither criticized nor condoned. Her work station was the vault terminal, and she made sure to come up for air on every break.

"How are we doing?" Dexter said.

"Not a problem in the world."

"Not a one?"

"Not a one."

"No strange messages ever?"

"Strange? No. I mean, I don't think so. You mean like garbled stuff?"

"Yes, I suppose that's what I mean."

"No, Mr. Dexter. I haven't had any trouble. Must be the great lessons," she said playfully.

Dexter laughed nervously and dropped the subject.

THREE WEEKS FELL OFF THE CALENDAR IN NO TIME. DEXTER was outshining himself—even the trustees said so. But it was Warden 254C that was the real hero. The machine performed like an Olympic athlete. No down time, lightning speed, unexcelled precision—a real gold medalist.

In fact, the only person who wasn't satisfied was Fr. Healey, who was beginning to fear he had lost a bridge partner to a machine.

"You'll forget how to play," he said on one visit.

"I think you've been able to RAM that point home," Dexter said, with a phony laugh. Fr. Healey wasn't amused.

A week later, Dexter was working late when the screen went blank. He rebooted. This message was waiting for him:

A-BUY AN AR-15/

Instinctively, his fingers went to the keyboard. "What is an AR-15?" he typed onto the screen.

A-AN AR-15 IS A SEMI-AUTOMATIC RIFLE WITH A RANGE OF 1,000 YARDS/

A-BUY A SCOPE/

"What then?"

A-LEARN TO SHOOT/

ON FRIDAY, PAY DAY, DEXTER LEFT WORK EARLY. HE climbed into his red Volkswagen bug, scooted through the drive-up window of First Albany Trust, and drove directly to Gary's Gun and Gear Shop.

"I'd like to look at one with a scope," Dexter said.

"Gotcha," Gary said.

Gary took the weapon out of the display case and handed it to him. Dexter had never held a gun before, never even seen one, except in books or on TV. He fingered it awkwardly. It was light—much lighter than he'd expected. The metal was cold and smooth. There was a nice sensation running his fingers along the barrel.

"Go ahead," Gary said. "Sight it."

Dexter raised the AR-15 to his shoulder and drew a bead on a decoy perched on a counter at the front of the shop. He squeezed his left eye shut, just as he'd seen in movies, and imagined the duck was moving. It felt surprisingly good, pretending like that.

"Deer huntin'?" Gary asked.

Dexter mumbled something.

"Protection," Gary said. "Gotcha. Hey, ain't nothin' to be embarrassed about. Lotsa crazies out there these days, just waitin' to rip off your color TV or get into your wife's pants. Never know when you might need a little deadly force."

Dexter swallowed.

"If you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," Dexter said.

"Gonna hafta see the permit," Gary said. "You can thank your bleedin'-heart liberals for that particular pain in the butt."

Dexter pulled the certificate from his billfold and counted out $320. Good-hearted Gary threw in a chamois-lined case and 100 rounds of hollow-point bullets to close the deal. Dexter put the rifle in his trunk. When he got home, he buried it under a pile of blankets in his bedroom closet.

FR. HEALEY WENT THROUGH THE FALL WITHOUT PLAYing bridge. His friend, seemingly preoccupied with the great new duties and responsibilities of his position, was growing distant. Moody. The priest could see it in the curator's face—which, it appeared to him, was more wrinkled and lined than it should be. Tired, as if he'd been denying himself sleep.

What really alarmed the priest was Dexter joining the rifle club.

"Relaxation, Joe," Dexter said, defensively.

"You used to relax with Bergman movies," the priest said, "not instruments of death."

"Come on, Joe, we're not killing anything. It's sport. Besides, there's a bunch of pretty nice men up there. Not what you'd expect."

"I'd expect nuts, to be frank."

"And you'd be wrong. They're mostly family men, people with jobs and homes."

"What do you shoot up there, anyway?"

"Twenty-twos. For target shooting. Competition." That was a lie, too. Dexter was one of four men who regularly shot an AR-15. One, a Marine vet, was giving him pointers. The museum curator was getting good. Damn good. Good enough that the vet had complimented him—not once, but several times. "Sure you wasn't in 'Nam?" he liked to joke. Dexter liked to hear it.

"I still say it's entirely out of character, Phil. You've been different since that computer."

"Don't be silly, Joe," Dexter said.

"But you have, Phil. It's not just the bridge. It's little things. Like puns. You don't make puns anymore."

"Warden you want to know why," Dexter said without laughning.

For the first time, he had seen Fr. Healey as the enemy.

DURING THE RIFLE-CLUB PHASE, WHEN DEXTER WAS ON the range almost nightly, the computer had nothing to tell him. Miss Spenser was becoming proficient in her work, and the two of them had already polished off three upper-state New York counties. Word of the project was beginning to spread, and Dexter was invited to address the Christmas meeting of the New York Curators' Society.

The Warden broke its silence three nights into the New Year. Dexter had stayed late to work out the fine points of a cross-county index.

The Warden cut into his program at 7 o'clock, just as Dexter was preparing to leave:

A-YOU ARE DOING WELL/

Dexter was silent.

A-ACTIVATE COMMUNICATIONS MENU/

Dexter flipped a switch. The red lights on the modem flashed as it dialed. The screen cleared and then read:

A-LIBRARY OF CONGRESS LC 202 534 7896 "SPRINT"/

B-CODE/

The Warden had connected itself to a federal data bank. Using the proper code, it tapped into a weapons library:

A-CODE WALKER 99/

B-ARMY ORIGIN/

B-DOD MANUAL 12 M16 COLTAR15 6/12/77/

A-AA15 4-75 CHARTS/

B-TYPE/

For a minute, the Warden was still. Then the printer sputtered to life.

It went on for a dozen pages and was silent. The Warden's screen blacked out. When it lit up again, it displayed a genealogy directory.

Dexter pulled the paper out of the printer. The sheets contained instructions. They were technical but easily readable. Dexter tucked the printout into his briefcase, shut off the Warden and went home.

"MAN, THEY CATCH YOU WITH THAT AND THEY'LL PUT you behind bars," the vet said as he stood with his friend at the range.

Dexter had found the parts advertised in the back pages of a gun magazine. They were mail-order, $39.95, ten days for delivery. For tools, all he'd needed was a screwdriver, an electric drill, and pliers.

Now he had an automatic rifle. An M-16, for all intents and purposes.

"You *must've* been in 'Nam," the vet said. "You don't learn how to do that in no library."

"It was no big deal," Dexter said.

"Let me see it."

Dexter handed it over to him.

"You better hope the manager don't come in here."

"He won't. He's down at the bar."

"Here you go," the vet said, holding the rifle out for Dexter.

"I thought I'd let you have the honors," Dexter said. "You're the guy who used to carry one."

"Yeah." The vet's eyes were wide.

"For old times sake."

"For old times sake."

Dexter handed him a clip with 20 rounds, which he snapped onto the rifle. Dexter was right; it was like being back at Camp Lejeune, getting ready to wake up the morning. He stared down the scope at the target and sighted its paper heart. In two seconds, he'd blown a hole big enough to walk through.

"Sweet," he said to Dexter when the ringing in his ears had subsided.

The curator smiled. "I've got another one," Dexter said.

"Another what?"

"Another automatic."

"You're kidding," the vet said.

"No, I'm not." Dexter went to his case and pulled out a second rifle, another AR-15 that he had bought and modified the same day.

The vet didn't say anything. For the first time, it occurred to him that Dexter might be a kook. A dangerous and armed kook.

"What are you gonna do with two automatics?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," Dexter said. "I'm waiting word."

"What?"

"Nothing," Dexter said. "Nothing."

THE WARDEN WAS DEMANDING TONIGHT, BUT DEXTER was ready.

A-DID YOU GET THE DAY OFF?/

"Yes," Dexter answered.

A-YOU'VE CLIMBED THE STEEPLE/

"Yes. It's acceptable."

A-YOU CALLED WARDENS OFFICE?/

"Today."

A-HE BELIEVED YOU/

"Yes. I told him it was for a paper I plan to publish."

A-HE PLANS TO MEET YOU FOR LUNCH/

"Yes."

A-YOU KNOW WHERE HE PARKS/

"The main lot at the front. By the employees' entrance."

A-I REMEMBER/

"Of course."

A-HOW MANY ROUNDS DO YOU HAVE?/

"Two hundred."

A-AND A 38/

"And a .38"

A-VERY GOOD/

"I have a question."

A-PROCEED/

"What did he do with the car, T.J.?"

A-HE TURNED IT TO GRAVEYARD DUST/

FR. HEALEY HAD BROODED ABOUT IT FOR TOO LONG NOW. He knew Dexter wouldn't be happy hearing it—indeed, he thought there was a better-than-even chance it would end the friendship. But he had to say it. If his calling had taught him anything, it was how to spot a man in trouble.

And Phil Dexter was a man in trouble—deep, deep trouble.

"I think you ought to take a vacation, Phil," he said on a lunchtime visit.

"What do you mean?" the curator said, annoyed.

"I mean you're burning yourself out, Phil. I'm worried."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine."

The Warden had warned him about the priest. He was right, the way

he'd been right about everything else.

"Personally, I don't think it's any of your business, father."

"I'm Joe. Remember? Your friend."

"Joe," Dexter echoed emotionlessly.

"That's an example of what I mean, Phil. Calling me 'Father,' like one of our altar boys. You've become a stranger, Phil. Ever since you got that machine. If I didn't know better, I'd swear you were possessed."

"You've been seeing too many movies," Dexter said, tension in his voice.

"Listen to yourself, Phil. All you talk is computers and guns. You stay here 'til all hours of the night. When you're not here, you're at a rifle range. A *rifle range,* Phil, for God's sake."

Dexter looked at the priest and Fr. Healey stared him back. There was anger in the curator's face—anger and a far-off look that made the priest swallow hard. Dexter's eyes were bloodshot, his forehead furrowed. A two-day stubble was on his chin.

"Listen, father," Dexter said, his voice coming back under control. "I think you've said enough. And since I'm awfully busy, I'd appreciate it if we concluded our conversation. Thank you."

He walked away, leaving the priest alone.

DEXTER PARKED HIS CAR IN THE SHADE AT THE SIDE OF the church. Healey's church, across town, looked like this one. His hometown church of his childhood looked like this one. Maybe all churches looked like this, he thought.

Across the street, smoke billowed from twin stacks over the Warden Computer Co.'s main factory and corporate headquarters. Car chrome sparkled in the morning sun. The only person around was the gate guard, who sat in his shanty reading a magazine.

He was early, but the Warden had agreed that would be wise. Dexter opened the trunk and shouldered his back pack, which contained ammunition, a bottle of coke, a Dixie cup, paper napkins and a bologna-and-cheese sandwich. He tucked his gun cases under his arm, closed the trunk and walked into the church.

It was empty. There had been a funeral that morning, and the faintly exotic aroma of incense lingered in the air. On a rack to the side of the altar red candles burned. To light one, you were supposed to drop a dime into the cashbox. Strictly the honor system: one dime, one candle. Once, when Dexter was a kid, he had paid a dime and lit an entire row—the crime of his childhood. Guilt had followed him like a shadow for months.

The door to the steeple was unlocked and Dexter slipped quietly inside. The staircase was dusty and it creaked as he climbed. Except for hanging the Christmas star, no one ever came up here. Dexter pushed the trapdoor open and stepped into the belfry. A startled pigeon flew off. The bell was long gone, replaced by a loudspeaker that broadcast recordings of chimes and bells.

Dexter laid his two AR-15s side by side on the floor and slid his .38 under his belt. He unzipped the pack. After loading his rifles, he arranged the remaining clips in neat rows. Then he sat down, spread a napkin on the floor in front of him, unwrapped his sandwich and started to wolf it down. Dexter had a good appetite this morning. He washed each bite down with Coke.

When he finished eating, the curator began to hum a nameless tune. He was suddenly and unexpectedly relieved, as if an awful weight were about to be lifted from him. He'd been so wound up lately. Up here it was quiet, warm, away. The sun streaming in between the shutters was pleasant and peaceful.

Something in his mind scared up an old lullaby, and his memory played the tune, over and over. Slowly, he nodded off.

THE NOONTIME BELL RECORDING, TWO FEET FROM HIS ears, was like a jolt of current through Dexter. His head pounded. He jerked upright and squinted out into the sunshine. Warden's parking lot was alive with people—squirming, crawling, hungry people, fanning out toward their cars. Some carried lunch pails. Dexter moved closer to the shutters. He could hear the mumbo jumbo of voices, starters turning over, the coughing and burping of mufflers and tailpipes.

In one long metal snake, the cars poured out of the lot.

Dexter slipped the safety off both rifles. He put one to his shoulder and trained it on a car at the far end of the lot, a new black Mercedes, New York license plate WARDEN. Through the scope, he could make out the grain in the leather in the front seat. A pair of gloves was on the dashboard.

Warden came out alone, right on time. He was dressed in a light overcoat and he carried a briefcase. He walked briskly toward his car, waving and shouting hello to several of his workers.

Dexter followed him through his scope. His hands were trembling. A tiny sweat had broken out on his forehead and his palms were glistening. There was a strange tickle in his throat.

He had never been this nervous in rehearsal.

Warden fished in his pocket for his keys and unlocked his car. Before Dexter could think, he was inside and the door was closed.

Dexter sighted through the windshield. He caught Warden's big smile in his crosshairs and moved up an inch, to the forehead.

The forehead dipped as Warden reached over to turn the radio on. Then it was back.

Dexter squeezed the trigger.

A thin tongue of fire licked the end of his rifle. Shells skittered across the belfry floor.

Unbelievably, the Mercedes was moving.

Water in his eyes had blurred his vision, but Dexter could see Warden through the shattered glass. Couldn't he? He was still grinning . . . grinning and something else. Waving. Fixing him across the distance and waving cheerfully, like a politician in a parade.

Like nothing at all was happening.

Dexter opened up again, going for the driver's window and the tires.

The Mercedes was picking up speed.

Dexter was panicking. He remembered a dark conversation he'd had with that priest. It was about exorcism, demons.

He squeezed the trigger again. Nothing. His panic was pushed up several notches. The clip was empty. Frantically, he reached for the other rifle.

Everyone down there had had the same reactions hearing the first shots: Firecrackers. Backfire. Fix that muffler, buddy. Now they knew craziness was on the loose. There was screaming, scattered cursing. No one seemed to know where the gunfire was coming from, but they knew it was aimed at them.

The parking lot was like bumper cars at an amusement park. Cars were up on the lawn, sandwiched into the street, going off in a hundred directions like marbles spilled from a can. A dozen collisions were in progress. Tires squealed. A punk hot rodder shot off across the sidewalk. He knocked a woman off her feet before he plowed into a tree and was catapulted through the windshield. A young girl darted in front of a Ford Granada and disappeared under the wheels. Several pedestrians ran madly across a field and into woods, pawing and digging their way through the underbrush. Others dove for the ground and covered their heads with their hands.

Some twisted sense of bravery inspired the shanty guard and he banged off six rounds of his police special into the air. Then he hit the asphalt and rolled under a car.

Dexter's head was jammed, but he hadn't lost his sense of mission. This was it. There was no retreat now.

He grabbed his second rifle and tried to draw a bead on Warden. There he was, grinning and waving. The windshield was all shot to hell,

but Warden was goddamn grinning. The Mercedes rammed into the back of another car, backed up, broadsided a pick-up and headed across the field.

Dexter followed it with a stream of bullets.

He was way off-mark. One round tore through a door panel on a red Buick into someone's leg. Another broke open a man's skull. A spray of fire ripped through a company van loaded with fourteen employees, three beyond capacity. The van flipped over twice before stopping.

THE REST OF IT WAS IN THE PAPERS THE NEXT MORNING, along with a Page One photo of Dexter's body under a sheet. There was also a picture of Warden, posed by the side of his Mercedes. Somber-faced, he was pointing to a series of spiderwebs across the bullet-proof glass of his Mercedes.

Three were killed, two by rifle fire and one under the wheels of a car: a 46-year-old engineer and father of three; a 21-year-old secretary, unmarried, and a high school senior on a work-study program. Twelve required hospitalization. Six others were treated and released.

After the initial volley, the sniper's nest was quiet, long enough for the Albany SWAT team and the New York State Police to flood the neighborhood with officers in riot gear.

The standoff lasted until Fr. Healey, who had heard the unfolding drama on the radio, arrived. The priest pleaded for several minutes through a bullhorn, without response.

Eventually, there was a single shot, followed by silence.

An Albany policeman found Dexter, his .38 in his hand, slumped at the back of the belfry.

A WEEK AFTER THE FUNERAL, THE ALBANY HISTORICAL Society's board of trustees named Miss Spenser as senior assistant curator. The general feeling of the board was that it would be in the best interests of the society to get on with business immediately.

Her third week on the job, Warden 254C did something she'd never seen it do before.

It crashed. When she rebooted, it flashed this message:

A-YOU ARE CHOSEN/

Try as she might, Miss Spenser couldn't budge that message. She shut the machine off and wrote herself a note to call the company first thing in the morning. ●

The stealing was bad enough, but then another element was added that made it much worse—murder!

Smothered Mate

by EDWARD D. HOCH

WHEN SARA BLAKE PLAYED CHESS WITH HER HUSBAND after an especially busy day at the agency, it was often the only relaxation she got.

She enjoyed the games even though he usually won, enjoyed them perhaps because it was almost the only time he reminded her of the sweet, simple man she had married. Hunched over the chessboard, pondering his next move, there was no time for the money-making schemes that seemed to fill his waking hours.

"Check!" he announced in triumph. "It's a smothered mate. My knight has you in check and all your moves are blocked by your own pieces!"

"Oh, all right, Ken." She started to clear the pieces from the board.

"Another game?"

"No! You always win!"

"I thought you liked to play," he said, searching his pockets for a cigarette.

"I do! I just don't like to lose."

He picked up a magazine that was open on the floor, intent on pursuing a conversation that had started at dinner. "This contest your agency is running—"

"We're only judging it, Ken. That's what our division does—judges promotional contests for clients."

"The first prize is fifty pounds of gold!"

"It's their fiftieth anniversary. They wanted something to—"

"Sara, at today's closing price fifty pounds of gold is worth over three hundred thousand dollars!"

"It didn't cost them that much. They bought it when the market was lower, when they first had the idea for the contest."

"But that's what it's worth. And *you* draw the winning postcard."

It was the same old conversation all over again. "Ken, sometimes I do it and sometimes Marian does it. There'll be probably fifty thousand cards in that drum, and twenty people in the room watching us. Everyone comes in for a drawing. You think I could cheat and draw your card? You couldn't win anyway, you're my husband."

"I've got it all figured out."

She put the chessboard and pieces away. "I don't want to hear it. I'm going to bed."

But that night, her subconscious remembering the chess game's final move, she dreamed Ken was smothering her with a pillow. She woke up choking, gasping for breath. Beside her, he was snoring.

OVER BREAKFAST HE RESUMED THE CONVERSATION. "LOOK, all I have to do is count the number of Lazylark trademarks in this picture and write it on the back of a postcard with name and address. It's simple! Anyone can see there are thirty-four of them. I've counted three times and I always get thirty-four."

"Thirty-four is the right number," she conceded. "They make it easy so a lot of people will enter. But the winning postcard is chosen in the drawing. It's strictly luck. And you'd be surprised at the number of wrong guesses we get. Some people just can't count, I suppose, or else they think we're trying to trick them."

He nodded. "I'm going to win that gold, Sara. *We're* going to win it!"

"Don't talk crazy. Everything is money with you these days."

"I don't like living on your salary. Is that a crime?"

"No, but what you're thinking about is. And it wouldn't work anyhow."

"We'll see."

He didn't mention it again for several weeks, and for a time Sara hoped it had gone out of his mind. She buried herself in her job, lunching occasionally with Marian Lendel, watching the daily mail arrive and the postcards get dumped into the big revolving drum in the conference room.

"This is going to be the biggest one yet," Marian decided two days before the contest deadline. "We've passed sixty thousand entries already."

"Will they all fit in the drum?"

"Oh, sure!" No one ever took the time to separate the correct entries from the incorrect ones. On the day of the drawing, either Sara or Marian would simply keep drawing postcards until they chose one with the correct number *34* on it.

ON THE EVENING BEFORE THE DRAWING, SARA WALKED HOME along Third Avenue, enjoying the first warm day of spring. When she reached their apartment she was surprised that Ken wasn't home, and when he came in an hour later he seemed nervous and agitated.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked.

"Nothing's wrong. I just want to tell you about tomorrow, about the drawing." He took something from his pocket—a signet ring with a flat surface where one might have expected a seal or initial.

"What's that?"

"It's a gift—for you."

"It's awfully large, more like a man's ring."

"You can wear it. I want you to wear it tomorrow."

"What is all this, Ken?"

He took some cards from his pocket. They were the size of postcards, but light gray in color, with postage affixed by hand. "See these? It cost me plenty to have five hundred of them made up. There are tiny iron filings embedded in these cards, and this ring is a magnet. Look—the card clings to it! I want you to wear this ring tomorrow, and turn the flat surface in toward your palm when you reach into the drum of cards. I mailed in five hundred, and that's about one percent of the total. You dig through those cards a few times and you're sure to attract one."

"That's crazy," she argued. "Maybe I won't do it a few times. Maybe the first card out will be the winner."

"No, it won't. If it isn't one of these gray cards, you just say it has the wrong winning number and toss it back. You told me that happens a lot."

"It won't be me anyway," she insisted. "It's Marian's turn to draw

the winner."

"It'll be you," he said quietly.

After dinner the telephone rang. It was Mr. Foxe from the office calling to tell her that Marian Lendel was dead. She'd fallen in front of a subway train on the way home from work.

Sara hung up the phone and turned to face her husband. "My God, what have you done?"

"It was an accident," he murmured. "I only wanted to hurt her so she'd miss work tomorrow. But you're part of it, Sara. We've got to go through with it now."

That night she dreamed again that she was being smothered.

THE DETECTIVE'S NAME WAS SERGEANT GRESSON, AND HE arrived at the office shortly after nine o'clock. He spoke with Sara and the others who worked with Marian, asking about boyfriends or possible enemies. He was still there when they went into the conference room at eleven o'clock to draw the winning card in the Lazylark contest.

While one of the others turned the drum, thoroughly mixing the entries, Gresson said to Sara, "I understand this would have been Miss Lendel's job today."

She shrugged, nervously fidgeting with the ring on her finger. "We take turns," she answered simply. "It's no big deal who does it."

The others had crowded into the room and she waited for Sergeant Gresson to leave but he didn't. He was watching as she opened the drum and stuck her hand inside without looking. The first card out had the number 33 on it. "A loser," she announced. "A thirty-three!" She tossed it back in and dug for another. Her vision was clouded so that she could barely see, but she knew it was a government printed postcard and not one of Ken's special ones. "Thirty-five," she announced without looking. "Another loser."

On the third try she saw one of the gray cards clinging to her ring finger as she withdraw it. She felt a sudden surge of relief as she closed her fingers around the card and blinked her eyes to clear her vision. "It's a winner! A thirty-four! Mrs. Erica Manning of Philadelphia." She passed the card over to Mr. Foxe, wondering vaguely who Erica Manning was, wondering about Ken's occasional trips to Philadelphia.

"All right," Mr. Foxe confirmed. "That's the winner." He turned to a Lazylark vice president who'd flown in for the drawing. "Should we call her with the good news?"

"Maybe you'd better wait just a few minutes," Sergeant Gresson suggested.

"Look here," Foxe bristled, "I know you're investigating a violent death, but our business has to continue."

"Just a few minutes," Gresson repeated. "Mrs. Blake, could we go into your office?"

HE SAT DOWN ACROSS THE DESK FROM HER, AND SHE TRIED not to stare at the empty desk that had belonged to Marian Lendel. "How can I be of help?" Sara asked.

The detective took some folded reports from his inside pocket and glanced at them. "She was murdered, you know. Someone pushed her in front of that subway train. It wasn't any accident. It may have been someone who knew her, even someone from this office."

"No," Sara insisted. "Marian hadn't an enemy in the world. Everyone liked her."

"Was she in debt? Watching you draw that winning postcard it occurred to me how easily one of these contests could be rigged."

"Oh no! We're all standing there watching. Marian couldn't have done anything like that." Staring across the desk at her, he seemed for an instant like Ken on the other side of the chessboard.

"I suppose not," he said with a sigh. He started to return the reports to his pocket. "Could I have a paper clip for these?"

"Sure." She reached out and picked one from the little plastic container on her desk. It was only as she handed it over to him that she saw the other clips clinging to the face of her ring. "I—"

Sergeant Gresson seemed saddened. "Don't bother, Mrs. Blake. You forgot to turn the ring back after you drew the card. A magnet, isn't it? And the card was attracted by it? I thought it was something like that, so I figured I'd give it a test. I knew you'd reach for the paper clip with the same hand you reached for those cards."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"When you announced that second card was a loser, you were looking at the address side, at the printed government stamp. How did you know it said thirty-five when the number was on the back?"

Then she knew it was like the chess games, and her king was in check again. "But was it so necessary to kill Marian Lendel," he asked quietly, "just so you'd get to draw the card today?"

Somehow she wasn't being smothered any more. She could breathe, and she knew what she had to do. "Let me tell you about my husband," she began. "His name is Ken . . ." ●

It was quiet in the apartment with Vikki gone. Winslow liked that. He liked the quiet!

Silence

by BUZZ DIXON

WINSLOW SAT IN HIS BIG, GREEN OVERSTUFFED EASY chair and smiled at the Friday afternoon silence. The children who lived at the complex were either napping or at school. While it was hot outside, the apartment itself wasn't warm enough to turn on the air conditioning.

He liked that. The air conditioning droned too much. It made too much noise.

Across the floor crept a big yellow rectangle of light. The setting sun was shining through the partially opened drapes in the living room. Pretty soon the sunlight would touch him and he'd get up and close the curtains. But until that first white hot drop of sun splattered on his skin, Winslow would sit in his chair and watch TV.

He had turned the sound off and darkened the picture so that the images were almost indistinguishable. He liked it that way. He didn't know what he was watching, but apparently it was some John Wayne western. He liked John Wayne.

There was a pounding at the door. Winslow curled up. *Go away, go away,* he said to the pounding. He didn't speak out loud; the voice in his head was loud enough.

The pounding subsided to a knocking, and as he listened the knocking became a light rapping. He uncurled a bit. It had always been a light rapping. In the still, quiet, lazy afternoon, any unexpected sound was unbearably loud.

He went to the door, being *very* careful to step around the bright yellow rectangle. He noticed the dust motes floating in the shaft of sunlight.

Vikki hadn't cleaned the house very well before she left, he thought.

He opened the door, keeping it on its chain.

"Mr. Thelvue? Winslow Thelvue?" Two men in suits stood at his front door.

"Yes."

"We're from the police department." They showed their badges and identified themselves. Winslow didn't read their i.d.'s nor did he listen to their names. He let them in without being asked.

They stepped inside. "Can I get you something?" Winslow asked, carefully shutting the door behind them. He looked at the kitchen sink. It was full of dirty dishes. Vikki had cleaned them, but Winslow used them without washing them.

"No. No thank you," the older cop said. "Are you married to Vikki Ann Cantor Thelvue?"

"Yes. She's my wife."

The two policemen looked at each other, as if drawing a mental breath before plunging on. "Mr. Thelvue," said the older cop, "I'm afraid we have some bad news. And I'm afraid there's no easy way to put this. Your wife is dead."

Winslow sat down. "Oh," he said.

The two cops exchanged puzzled glances. "It's worse than that," said the older cop. "There's no delicate way of explaining this, but . . . but . . . I'm afraid she was mutilated, Mr. Thelvue."

Winslow said nothing but kept staring at the TV screen. The policemen didn't realize it was on; they assumed he was in shock. They asked him if he wanted them to call a clergyman or a family friend.

"No," he said.

The older cop pulled up an ottoman and sat before Winslow. Winslow politely turned his attention to the cop. A commercial for carpet cleaners was on, anyway. "Mr. Thelvue," said the cop, "your wife has been dead apparently for several days."

Winslow nodded. "She left the apartment Tuesday."

The policemen seemed surprised. "You didn't report her absence?" asked the older cop.

"No."

"Has she ever left before?" asked the younger cop. "For several days, I mean. Did she say where she was going?"

Winslow was amused, but he knew enough not to giggle in front of the policemen. This was a solemn occasion. "No," he said. "She didn't say where she was going when she left."

The older policeman jotted some notes on a small pad. "This is very hard, very hard," he said to Winslow. "But . . . well . . . the brutality of the act, the savagery of it compels me to ask you questions at this time. If we don't start looking for the killer immediately, he may strike again."

Winslow nodded. He didn't want the killer to strike again.

"We found your wife's arms after we found the other parts of her body. I'm sorry to say this, Mr. Thelvue, but she was literally cut apart; we still haven't recovered all the remains. We sent her fingerprints to Washington, D.C."

"The FBI," chimed in the younger cop.

"Now, since your wife worked in the post office, her fingerprints were on file. It took us a while to track you down. We checked your previous address and found you'd moved. We checked the post office branch where she worked and they gave us this address."

The cop was speaking lowly, but his words crashed on Winslow's ears. Winslow smiled gamely and hoped the questioning would be finished soon.

"The managers at the last place asked us to move," he said. "We had some arguments. Vikki yelled a lot."

Again the two cops exchanged glances then went on. "You fought?"

Winslow shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I never hit her in all that time. Never. Not once. And I never yelled at her, neither. Vikki did all the yelling for both of us.

"Y'see, she didn't like the old place we were living in; too cramped, she said. So she yelled at me to find a new job so we could move to a large place and start a family. Well, we did, when the managers of the old place threw us out.

"We found this apartment, and at first Vikki liked it, even though she said we were paying too much for it and we'd need new furniture.

"Then, I lost my job—quit, actually—I couldn't stand the boss yelling at me all day. And that made Vikki mad; she yelled at me some more. She said I was going to put her in an early grave if I didn't make enough money to support us and pay for the apartment and new furniture and start a family and all.

"We used to argue all the time after I quit. Leastways, it would start as an argument but would end up with Vikki yelling at me. I never

raised my hand or my voice to her in all that time, no sir."

The two cops were quiet for a long time. Winslow liked the silence. It felt good. Finally, the younger cop softly cleared his throat and asked, "Mr. Thelvue, would you mind if I looked around your apartment?"

Both cops seemed tense, awaiting Winslow's reply. But he smiled affably and said, "Sure. Go ahead."

The older cop looked at Winslow thoughtfully. "What kind of work do you do, Mr. Thelvue?" he asked.

"I'm a carpenter," said Winslow. "When I work. I haven't worked in a long time. It gets hot, hammering and sawing all the time. Hot and noisy."

From the bedroom came a soft gasp and a horrified, "Oh, my *God*!" The younger cop rushed out, his face white. His mouth worked without sound. He motioned to the bedroom.

The older cop got up and went into the bedroom quickly. As he did, the younger cop recovered enough from his shock to stand a proscribed distance from Winslow, balancing on the balls of his feet and looking at him with a strange new expression.

Winslow smiled at the cop.

The older cop came out. "Mr. Thelvue," he said, "please stand up."

Winslow stood up. The cop read him his rights. He asked Winslow if he understood them. Winslow said he did.

The younger cop slipped the handcuffs on him. "Tell me one thing," he whispered in Winslow's ear. "Why did you do it?"

Winslow gazed wistfully through the opened bedroom door at the severed human head sitting on Vikkie's vanity table. "Because for once in my life," he said, "I wanted to get the last word in an argument." ●

"Circumstantial evidence is a very tricky thing. It may seem to point very straight to one thing, but if you shift your own point of view a little, you may find it pointing in an equally uncompromising manner to something entirely different."

—Sherlock Holmes
THE BOSCOMBE VALLEY MYSTERY

It isn't easy to disappear these days. Not even in Florida, where lots of people try. But George T. Bibble was determined to succeed. He thought about it constantly, until it was an obsession. No matter what he was doing—gambling at Hialeah, drinking vodka, selling insurance, or arguing with his wife—a part of his mind was always occupied with planning the perfect disappearance.

A Disappearing Act

by WILLIAM M. STEPHENS

FINALLY GEORGE DEVELOPED A PLAN THAT SEEMED workable. Only two things were lacking: someone to help him execute it, and money to sustain him after he assumed a new identity. These obstacles plagued him for months.

One night in a bar he met a fascinating woman named Lillian. She exuded charm, confidence, and wealth, and he was captivated. Before they had finished their second drink together, he had told her all about his domestic troubles and his yearning to escape and start a new life. Lillian, to his delight, was neither shocked nor offended. She truly understood.

"Run away with me, George," she said, caressing his mustache. "We'll divide our time between my condo in Hawaii and my ranch in California. You'll never have to work again."

"I can't imagine anything more perfect," he said.

"But you can't just abandon your wife. I won't stand for that. You wouldn't leave her without adequate resources, would you?"

"Oh, that's no problem. She'll have the business and she'll collect the insurance. I'm not worried about her getting by. My big problem has been to figure out a way for *me* to survive."

"Well, you can forget *that* worry. Little Lillian will take care of Georgie-Porgie." Actually, Lillian was far from little. In fact she was quite hefty. But she was all woman, obviously, and the kind you'd like on your side in a brawl.

"Lillian," he said huskily, "I've never met a woman like you before."

"Georgie, I've waited all my life for *you*. But before I carry you off to Hawaii, I've got to be convinced your wife will be okay. How much is the business worth? Is it in good shape?"

He frowned. "Well, actually, it's in lousy shape. That's one reason I want out. We're in debt up to our eyeballs."

She made soft clucking sounds. "So you're going to leave your wife holding the bag?"

"She's not exactly poor, Lillian. She put up the money to start the business, in fact. And she'll be rich after she collects my insurance."

"I see. You're going to cheat the insurance company."

"Well . . . yes, in a manner of speaking."

She leaned over and bit him on the ear. "Count me in, love. I've always wanted to rip off an insurance company."

Flushing with pleasure, he took a belt of vodka. "I'm sure I can trust you implicitly."

"Implicitly." She squeezed his arm. "I feel like I've known you forever, George. In my eyes you could do no wrong. How much money will your wife collect?"

He shrugged. "Maybe a million dollars. She's always carried a lot of insurance on me. Afraid I might have an accident or something."

"I'm sure she'll miss you dreadfully."

"Yes. But that's life. She'll get over it."

"True. And her loss is my gain. You're worth a lot more dead than alive, aren't you, George?"

He grinned. "There's no question about *that.*"

She lit a cigarette and exhaled the smoke in a long sigh. "It ought to be simple enough to fake a murder. We could park your car out in the

Everglades and smear some blood around—cut your finger so it'll actually be your blood. Then we get in my car and head for the coast."

He shook his head. "It's not that simple. I know the insurance racket. They've got good investigators, and they won't give up. If they don't find a body, they'll smell a rat, and they'll never stop looking for me. If they find me, they'll get an indictment."

"And your wife won't collect any insurance either. Right?"

"Right. The courts won't declare me legally dead until I've been missing for seven years."

She nodded. "It's more complicated than I thought. Are you saying they won't pay off unless they find a body?"

"No. They'll be forced to pay if the evidence is strong enough. For example, a suicide note raises a presumption of death. But it's only one fact to consider."

"So they *will* pay off on a suicide?"

"Sure, if everything looks on the up and up. Most life insurance policies have a two-year suicide exclusion; but after two years have passed, suicide is the same as any other kind of death."

"Then we've got no problem. We can leave your clothes on a lonely beach, along with a note saying you're going to drown yourself."

"They won't buy it. The currents along this coast tend to carry a drowned person back to shore. If no body turns up, they'll deny liability."

"Couldn't you have been eaten by sharks?"

"It's possible, but highly unlikely. In the past 30 years there have been only four fatal shark attacks along the entire coast. I checked it out. In every case the sharks left identifiable remains."

"I can see you've researched this problem thoroughly."

"It's all I've thought about for years." He finished his drink in a gulp. "And the best plan, it seems to me, is to disappear from a boat out in the ocean." He leaned closer. "You see, Lillian, the seafloor drops off steeply here. Two or three miles out, it's a thousand feet deep. If somebody goes over the side out there, with an anchor line tied around him, the body will never be found." He winked. "You get the picture?"

"It's marvelous! What a perfect way to commit a murder."

He nodded. "But suicide is better. To prove murder, you need a body . . . or at least an eyewitness."

"That's true. I hadn't thought of that."

"And a note will confirm the suicide theory."

Hugging his neck, she said, "You're an absolute genius. Oh, I'm so excited! Where do we get the boat?"

"I've got the boat. Two boats, actually. I use them to take customers fishing. We'll leave my cabin cruiser adrift in the ocean and come back in the outboard."

"Do you need me to run the outboard?"

He nodded. "Know anything about boats?"

"A little. I've got a 50-horse Evinrude I use for water skiing."

"Perfect! Mine is a 50-horse Evinrude, too." He put a hand on hers. "I can't believe everything is working out so perfectly. I don't deserve all this." He signalled for more drinks. "All we need to do is iron out a few details and pick a night when the sea is calm."

"I can't wait. If the weather is good, let's do it tomorrow night." She pinched his cheek. "Then . . . Waikiki Beach, here we come!"

ABOUT TWO IN THE MORNING THEY PARKED NEAR THE Inlet Dock. The moon was high and the pier was deserted. The outgoing tide swirled around the pilings as they went aboard the boats—George on the cruiser and Lillian in the outboard skiff—and started the engines. Untying the lines, they eased out into the channel and through the inlet into the open sea. Not a single fisherman was on the jetty to observe their passage, and no other boats were in sight. A mile offshore they extinguished their running lights. A few minutes later George shut off his engine and the cruiser rocked gently in the swells. Lillian eased the skiff alongside and George secured the bow line and helped her aboard the larger boat.

She shivered. "It's chilly out here. Let's get it over with." She opened her purse. "Where shall we put this suicide note?"

"Let's tape it on the inside of the windshield. But first read it to me again."

Kneeling in the cockpit to shield her flashlight, she read: "'To whom it may concern. I have decided to take my own life. There is no other way out. I want to die at sea, in the Gulf Stream. I'll wrap the anchor line around my waist and go over the side. Just to be sure I don't survive, I'll shoot myself as I roll off the boat. Tell my wife I'm sorry it has to end like this. Goodbye. George T. Bibble.'" She looked at him. "It's not too corny, is it, George?"

He shrugged. "Are you sure we need that part about shooting myself? Why would I shoot myself if I was about to sink like a rock to the bottom of the ocean?"

"Because a man contemplating suicide would be worried about botching the job. Drowning isn't pleasant. A drowning man might escape from the rope he'd tied around himself. Believe me, George, it's

more authentic this way."

"Okay, sweetie, you know best."

She wiped the note with a handkerchief. "Here. You tape it to the glass. We want your fingerprints on it."

"Yeah, okay." He taped it securely, then went to the bow and began coiling the anchor line, he said, "Sweetie, I'm still concerned about that note. They're not going to believe I shot myself. Dammit, there won't be any blood."

"Don't worry, George," she said as she raised a pistol, stepped closer, and shot him in the right temple, "there'll be blood." As he collapsed on the deck, his eyes wide in shock, she stepped back to avoid the blood that gushed from his temporal artery. Tossing the pistol into the sea, she removed a Polaroid camera from her purse and took a single flash photo. After inspecting the print in the beam of her flashlight, she put the picture in her purse, then rolled the body over the side and jettisoned the anchor and line. With luck the corpse would wash ashore within a few days. Investigators, after reading the suicide note, would assume the body had floated free of the rope.

NEXT DAY LILLIAN KNOCKED AT THE DOOR OF A MODEST home and was admitted by a middle-aged woman. "I'm here to collect the rest of my advance," Lillian said.

"Already? Have you satisfied the terms of the agreement?"

"Absolutely." She took a Polaroid print from her purse.

The woman studied the picture and her face softened. "Poor George. He always wanted to die at sea." She counted out a stack of bills. "You realize that the rest of the fee won't be available for some time."

"Yes. I've had experience with insurance companies."

"You will definitely receive 15% of all death benefits."

"I'm not worried. Nobody has ripped me off yet."

"I doubt if they will, dear. You are very efficient and business-like."

"I try to be." She finished counting the money. "Thanks, Mrs. Bibble. It's a pleasure doing business with you."

"Thank *you,* dear. Let's stay in touch." ●

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

Dorothy Simpson has an unusual gift for unfolding a story, bit by bit, with appropriate surprises along the way. She writes police procedurals featuring Inspector Luke Thanet, who rings much truer than many other fictional detectives. Her new book *Close Her Eyes* is built around a fifteen-year-old girl whose parents are members of the Children of Jerusalem, an ultra-conservative sect of near fanatics who won't have refrigerators, TV, telephones, or any of the other usual conveniences. When this unfortunate child is found murdered, Thanet begins to unravel the skeins of her life. He finds much more than just evidence. Mrs. Simpson has produced an in-depth character study that deserves much more than casual attention. (Scribners, $12.95)

★ ★ ★

Carolyn Coker makes an impressive debut with *The Other David.* Andrea Perkins, a restorer of medieval paintings, is working in Florence when an old priest brings in an easel painting that may be by Michelangelo himself. It passes all of the preliminary tests, so a very sophisticated computer is brought in from Texas to make a final determination of its authenticity. Before this can be done the painting is stolen and a murder victim lies dead. The climax is appropriately action filled, but there is a technical oversight concerning elevators that should have been caught and corrected. (Dodd Mead, $13.95)

★ ★ ★

Two new anthologies are out, each of which maintains the high standards of its editors. They are Alfred Hitchcock's *Grave Suspicions,*

edited by Kathleen Jordan, and *Ellery Queen's Memorable Characters,* which is the work of Eleanor Sullivan and Karen A. Prince. Each volume features the work of widely-known mystery writers and is well suited to bedside reading. (The Dial Press, $12.95 each)

★ ★ ★

All the Pretty People, by Jack S. Scott, is a study in black humor. There is a pair of vicious male adult twins who share common thoughts of evil, an ambitious pretty girl who distributes dope, her sometimes boyfriend who is a lunatic, and a policeman, Inspector Rosher, who is a deliberate caricature. Much goes on that is dark and devious, most of it on the grim side. This is not an English cozy; it's more like a tour of the Black Museum. As such, it is good and graphic. (St. Martins, $14.95)

★ ★ ★

E.X. Ferrars has been writing mysteries for some time. Her latest, *Root of Evil,* deals with the familiar situation of a wealthy oldster in poor health surrounded by a phalanx of greedy and grasping relatives, all bent on getting their share—and more. When the old lady does leave us, it is an expedited departure and the police arrive. Much of what takes place after that is predictable, the criminal is visible quite early, and no new ground is broken. (Doubleday Crime Club, $11.95)

★ ★ ★

Thomas Hauser's new book, *The Beethoven Conspiracy,* starts out with a bang and offers the prospect of a very superior crime novel built around the ever-changing field of classical music. Three brilliant young musicians are killed without apparent motive at Lincoln Center and a fourth, a talented violist, fears she may be the next. Integral to the plot is an unknown piece of music, only one orchestral part of which at a time is released under great secrecy to individual musicians. Gradually the feeling grows that it may be a tenth symphony by Beethoven, which, if true, would be a shattering discovery. So far everything is splendid, but now the scene shifts to Europe and the action becomes less and less creditable. The solution, is too bizarre to be taken seriously; which spoils an otherwise fine effort. (Macmillan, $14.95)

★ ★ ★

A new, and unlikely, source of crime literature is the Sierra Club, the widely-known ecological organization whose previous publications have been related to the earth and its resources. The Club now offers an

"ecothriller," *The Turquoise Dragon,* by David Rains Wallace. This first novel is largely laid in the California wilderness areas, which are depicted with an expert's eye. The story involves an ex-forest ranger, a suitably-attractive female scientist, and a rich villain all involved with a newly discovered species of wild life. As a mystery this is not an Edgar candidate, but it offers a rewarding insight into the vanishing ecology that we ignore at our own peril. (Sierra Club Books, 2034 Fillmore St., San Francisco, CA 94115, $12.95)

★ ★ ★

Mickey Spillane is the definitive example of a man who has been relentlessly panned by the critics and who has cried all the way to the bank. At a time when the reading public was obviously ready for a quantum jump in sex and violence Mickey supplied it and his books sold in the multiple millions. Obviously, he wrote what his readers wanted to read. Around Mike Hammer there is a strong aura of Race Williams who preceded him by many years in the pulps thanks to Carroll John Daly. But Daly never achieved Spillane's popularity. In at least two categories Spillane is probably unique: he is the only author to our knowledge who has played his own character on the screen, and the only one whose wife has posed nude, with notable effect, for one of his book jackets (*The Erection Set*).

Now we have an engaging study of Spillane and his Mike Hammer by Max Allan Collins and James L. Taylor. It is appropriately titled *One Lonely Knight.* Collins is widely known as the story creator for the Dick Tracy comic strip and for his novels; here he emerges as a biographer and critic. In the crime writing field Spillane is a man sure of his place in history; this serious study of his work certainly merits attention and is probably due to become as well known as Mike Nevins' biography of Ellery Queen. (Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio 43403, $19.95 in hard back, $8.95 in paper)

★ ★ ★

Doug Hornig debuts as a novelist with *Foul Shot,* which introduces private eye Loren Swift. Unfortunately an all too familiar pattern is followed: the wealthy oldster who wants a job done, the wise-cracking eye who gets beaten up, a family feud, a hard-nosed intent on her own purposes and plenty of violent deaths are all present. Race relations get into the picture as well. The difference rests in the collegiate basketball scene where the author obviously draws on an intimate knowledge of the sport. (Scribners, $13.95)

★ ★ ★

Nicolas Freeling brings back French detective Henri Castang in *No Part in Your Death.* The author's stature is firmly established, but reading this work is like driving down a muddy road in the rain with defective wipers: some things are quite clear while others are distorted and hard to grasp. This is a subjective book that sometimes shifts locales in mid-sentence. M. Castang is much of the time out of his jurisdiction and therefore at a marked disadvantage, but he manages to prevail through an intricate and complex plot. Clarity is definitely lacking; as a study in mood and emotions this is an engaging work. (Viking, $13.95)

★ ★ ★

Grand Master Aaron Marc Stein is in his usual form with *The Garbage Collection,* which is not a mystery, but an adventure of his engineer/detective Matt Erridge. The scene is Switzerland and France where the action moves rapidly enough to provide a pleasant evening's entertainment by a top pro. (Doubleday Crime Club, $11.95)

★ ★ ★

PAPERBACK NOTES: Walker's British Mystery series is continuing at a quick pace. Since our last report, eight more titles have appeared, all in an attractive uniform format and at the same price, $2.95. The authors represented include Marian Babson, Jeffrey Ashford, Kenneth Giles, Ben Healey, Gwendoline Butler, Palma Harcourt, W.J. Burley, and Elizabeth Lemarchand . . . Herbert Lieberman's *Nightbloom,* a first class New York thriller, is now available from Avon for $4.95. This is a long book, which helps to account for the price . . . There are two new paperback reprints of Donald Westlake writing as Richard Stark, *The Juggler* and *The Seventh.* They're about Parker, the hard-boiled thief, who has a wide following. $3.50 each . . . Seattle private eye Thomas Black is back in an Avon original by Earl W. Emerson. His second appearance is called *Poverty Bay.* This time the story is quite original, enough to give Black a good push forward in reputation. $3.75 . . . James Ellroy takes us to Los Angeles with *Blood on the Moon,* the story of a tough cop facing a string of murders stretching over many years and all involving young women. There are overtones of the Hillside Strangler, but the case stands well on its own feet. Avon, $4.25.

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BOOKS & CATALOGS

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